

GOVICIDE:
Comply

By Edward Dentzel

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“People have no rights when the One World Government is never wrong.”

Hamilton shouted the cryptic sentence as the two Prison Guards escorted him through the Homicide office. At the utterance, the tall guards tugged harder even though Hamilton had paraded with them step by step. Clutching the murderer by his triceps, they dragged him across the tiles. His soles clicked over each edge, audible since every detective had stopped what they were doing to observe. It was not every day that a lowly Homicide Department had such an iconic figure under its roof.

The three turned the corner and vanished from view. Yet, the onlooking detectives' demeanors did not change. As if reliving the preceding thirty seconds, they continued to stand like the statues inside the Memorials in the District. Then, one by one, with the quiet continuing, their heads turned to one of their own, a detective who knew Hamilton a lot better than they: Gambling City Homicide Detective Michael Locke, Hamilton's captor.

The 32-year old detective, sitting on the corner of his desk, had watched the procession and his colleagues from thirty feet away across the maze of cubicles. As they focused on him, Locke tried to ignore it, his attention still on the words Hamilton uttered. The male's voice was deeper than he expected given Hamilton's average build and height, him sounding like one of those OWG opera basses. Just another surprise to go along with all the others Locke encountered trying to catch Hamilton.

A few more seconds and Locke's colleagues started to clap. He smiled and held up his hand for them to stop.

“No, no, please.”

This outburst of appreciation surprised and did not surprise Locke. On one hand, these detectives were strangers to him, and this was his first day back in the home office in two years. While he traveled all over the world tracking Hamilton, there had been turnover in Gambling City's office. His former partners were gone but no one knew where. So, to get such attention from strangers was unexpected.

On the other hand, Hamilton had struck at the heart of the OWG by murdering those who provided the Masses with everything. Locke supposed this was the instigation for each clap. They were not thanking Locke for a job well done. They clapped because they knew Hamilton, for sure, would never interrupt their Goods and Services deliveries from the OWG.

Locke could not blame them. He felt the same way. Caring about doing good Homicide work came second. Protecting the supply of Goods and Services always came first. And if those two priorities intersected? Even better. In Homicide, though, that combination never happened.

Until Hamilton.

He glanced at the killer's file to distract himself and think through the facts of the case. Murderers were nothing new in the One World Government. A few of them even

killed more than one subject. Some of them even got up to five years in Gambling City's prison.

But, Hamilton was like none of those. What he had done was much more than simple homicide. It was govicide, the ultimate OWG crime: the killing of Government. Specifically, the murder of fourteen Govicide Agents, males and females whose task it was to make sure the Masses received everything they needed to be good subjects.

When the clapping died down, out of the corner of his eye Locke noticed the others break into cliques, inhaling and exhaling about the evil now encased in their jail. This would definitely be the topic of conversation with their girlcomrades and boycomrades tonight, and for days to come.

However, Locke remained apart, the recorder in his mind replaying Hamilton's words. He would have to remember them for his interrogation scheduled to begin in a few minutes. A lack of sleep hampered his efforts. He had not slept in over twenty-four hours.

"Rights?" The words so soft his ears did not hear them. "What are rights? What about lefts? What about--?"

A slap on Locke's left shoulder broke him out of his momentary spell, causing him to almost fall off his perch.

"Locke, you are back!"

He righted himself to see Gambling City Homicide Captain Bradley Gates.

"I still got it," Gates laughed and bobbed his head, his double chin shaking this way and that. "Twenty years older and seventy pounds heavier than any of my detectives and I can still creep up on you."

The laughing made the Captain wheeze. A lung problem probably. If Gates did not watch himself, he might end up on the OWG Medical Director's list for termination. A lung problem lifted a subject to the top of it. The OWG never wasted Goods and Services on old, sick subjects.

Gates was an obedient subject, though. He would accept his fate without a fuss.

"Yes, Captain, you sure do," the detective answered.

"Come here, I have not seen you in forever." Without hesitation, Gates wrapped Locke in a hug strong enough to pop a large stuffed animal. The detective's thin shirt was no defense against Gates' belt buckle digging into Locke's stomach. By the luck of the OWG, the embrace lasted just a second.

"Good to see you, too." Locke meant it, but his body tensed at the hug. He was not the touching type except where his girlcomrade, Jade, was concerned. Unless, of course, a suspect got out of hand. Then the fists came out.

Gates stepped back. "Look at you. You are missing a few hairs I see. But other than that you look the same as you did when you took off to catch Hamilton. How long has it been?"

"Two years. Actually over that." Locke glanced at Hamilton's file. The thickness of it tired his right wrist as he tried to keep all 1000 pages from falling out.

"Where has the time gone?"

"Chasing Hamilton. That's where." Saying it, reality set in—two years, fourteen Govicide Agents dead, one killer. Hamilton. A spree unprecedented in the OWG. His left hand fluttered at the thought. His right hand tried but the file's weight kept it steady.

“Yeah . . .” Gates’ voice trailed off. He leaned against a vacant desk six feet from Locke, folding his arms. “I tried keeping tabs on you through some backdoor channels but it was tough. I wouldn’t find out until several days later you were in Dale City, Cornville, Snow City, and all the others.”

“I wish I could have flown around like the Govicide Agents on the case. Boats, trains, and buses get a little old when you’re going all over the World.” Locke looked away, shutting his mouth like a solved case. His wishes were un-mandated.

Would Gates tell the OWG he said it? Probably not. If so, Locke would deny it.

“But by doing all that you showed the Govicide Director and the Exalted Ruler how much you care about the OWG and it giving everything to everyone.”

“Yeah, I know.” Locke’s wrist tired. He placed the OWG Manual-sized file on the desk.

“Besides, you are going to get to interrogate him. So, you must have done something correctly. And this Hamilton case meant something unlike all the murders of the Masses we have to investigate here. All we are doing here is making sure the victims’ families stay in line, correct? But, you were doing something to protect the OWG.” Gates pointed at Locke with enough force that it could have pierced a ribcage.

“It’s just that--“

“What?” Gates rose from his leaning position.

“The Govicide Agents and I trailed this male for two years and look at the information we have on him.” Locke ripped through a few pages to the front of the manila folder. “OWG ID: unknown. Place of Birth: unknown. Age: unknown. OWG birth certificate: not found. The only reason we call him Hamilton is because he gave that name to a passerby after he killed his second Agent. It’s like this subject doesn’t exist.”

Gates did not answer right away. Instead, the rotund Captain leaned back even more against the desk. He looked off to Locke’s right, like something caught his eye.

“He got lucky.” Their eyes met but then Gates’ shifted off to the right.

“I suppose.” Doubt revealed itself in the back of Locke’s mind. It played peek-a-boo with his long-held beliefs and then disappeared like it had never been there at all. “Fourteen dead Agents dead for no reason. Well, except for the first murder occurring on the fiftieth anniversary of the One World Government. That couldn’t have been a coincidence.”

Gates pressed his bulbous lips together and nodded, “probably not.”

“Who would do that? Govicide makes sure the OWG provides everything. And this male is killing the subjects who make it happen? I don’t get it.” Locke picked up Hamilton’s file and then dropped it on the desk. A couple of detectives at nearby workstations spun in Locke’s direction at the thud.

“Hey, Locke.” Gates moved to the detective’s side, putting his arm around Locke’s thin shoulders. “I am just a Homicide Captain, so what do I know? Subjects murder subjects. We investigate because the OWG tells us to. It keeps the Masses happy. But we all know murders are good for the OWG. Fewer subjects, more stuff for everyone else. In reality, we are working against the OWG when we investigate murders. But since subjects cannot control their emotions we have to investigate to keep them under control. All that matters is the OWG.” Gates hesitated for a second and tilted his head toward Locke. “Just be happy the Govicide Director is giving you a chance to talk to Hamilton.”

Locke jumped in when Gates took a long, squeaky breath. “But he said it’s not because I earned it. The reason--”

“The reason does not matter. This is the first time the Govicide Department has done anything for Homicide. So, give it your best shot. Who knows what can happen?”

Escaping his grasp, Locke moved to his left. “What does that mean?” Locke’s abdomen trembled like a guitar string. “You don’t mean I might become a Govicide Agent?”

“That is exactly what I am saying,” Gates answered.

“No one ever gets recruited into Govicide. You either pass the test to be a Govicide Agent or you don’t. I failed. You failed. We all failed. None of us in this office has a chance to be in Govicide.”

The Director intimated something Locke wished at one time but forgot due to its impossibility: With the capture of Hamilton, Locke might get promoted to Govicide Agent—the most important work position in the OWG—even though he had failed the Govicide Test when he graduated from OWG high school.

All it took were a few choice words from Gates for the hopes to come tumbling back out.

“Detective Locke, if you perform a good interrogation, you give yourself a chance.” The Captain tapped Locke’s arm. “I have some things to do. But, it is great to have you back no matter what happens.” He spun away then turned back to Locke. “And, hey, if you are still just a Homicide Detective tomorrow, the OWG will continue to provide everything you need.” Gates smiled and meandered his way back into the cluster of cubicles.

He had not realized how close to the surface his irrational feelings of becoming an Agent were. Somehow he had buried them under all those ship and bus trips over the last two years. They got covered up with him eating on the run while the Govicide Agents on the case ate fine food. While he ran from bus stop to bus stop, they drove their automobiles. While he threw up over ship railings due to seasickness, they watched in-flight OWG films about how Govicide would bring all Offenders to the gallows in the District and hang them for all the Masses to see.

All his Govicide aspirations had evaporated into the air of the World.

But, now they were back. And undeniable.

“You have no chance to be a Govicide Agent. You have no chance to be a Govicide Agent.” He said it low enough so the others could not hear, pacing back and forth in front of his desk like a sentry. “You have no chance to be a Govicide Agent . . .”

This had all been so simple. He failed the Govicide test but passed the Homicide one thirteen years ago. Most everyone could pass the Homicide test but hardly anyone took it because few subjects wanted to have a job working, in subtle ways, against the OWG. Still, Locke felt attracted to the chance to solve real-life puzzles, so he took it and passed.

He predicted a life of easiness. One where very few subjects cared if murders got solved or not. If murderers got caught, they got caught. If they did not, no one would care.

Then there was Hamilton.

The killer’s name in his thoughts brought Locke’s attention to the clock on the far side of the office. 8:58am.

Caught up in his talk with Gates and his own thoughts, he almost forgot the interrogation started in two minutes.

Scooping up Hamilton's file and leaving his half-full cup of OWG coffee on his desk, Locke hustled down the hallway. He had been down it many times. At one time, it had been brightly lit, like he heard the corridors of the Govicide Headquarters in the District were. Now, it looked like a Gambling City street at night. Bulbs burned out. Shadows in every corner. Locke squinted to see to the end of it. Just another sign Homicide paled in importance to other Departments.

His footsteps echoed off the bare, cement block walls. The sound alerted the Guards to his arrival. Locke knew them both, Patterson and Knight, but like everyone else in Homicide, he had not seen them in a while.

"Detective Locke, good to have you back," Patterson welcomed, fiddling with his belt like Locke remembered.

"Glad to be back. He give you two any trouble?" Locke inquired.

"Besides those weird sentences? Not really," Knight answered.

"You mean like what he yelled back there?" Locke motioned back toward the office area.

"Yeah," Patterson looked in through the door's small window, "what does that mean, anyway? Rights?"

"And he used the word, people," Knight added, touching his goatee, then stopping in mid-stroke. "That is un-mandated. Oops, I just said it, too."

"He's a mystery," Locke answered. "If you were allowed to see his file, you'd understand. I'll try to figure it out when I talk to him."

"Yeah. But he said a lot more." Knight added.

The trembling, which had subsided, came back in a crescendo. "What did he say?"

"It was not like he just talking off the top of his head. He sounded like he was reciting something," Patterson looked at Knight to back him up.

"Yep. That is what he was doing," Knight chimed in.

The edge of Locke's mouth turned up a quarter of an inch. "He's been strange for the last two years. Why should that change now?"

Both guards nodded.

Locke moved to open the door. Patterson stepped in the way.

"Cannot let you go in yet, Detective." Patterson put up his hand.

"What? Why?" Locke looked at the other guard, wondering if this was just a mistake.

"Mandates from Govicide. The prisoner is not to be questioned until their officials are ready." Knight stepped in front of the door.

"But they were the ones who allowed me to do this interrogation in the first place. Now I have to wait for them?"

Under normal circumstances, a detective could overrule a Guard. Not now. Not when the Guards were acting under direct mandate from Govicide. Locke's hands gripped his hips, file tucked against his elbow, and he looked up to the ceiling.

"That is what they said. They will be observing from a remote location. And they are not ready yet."

Locke stepped back and glared at the two of them. He was ready to interview Hamilton, nervousness or not.

“We cannot disobey Govicide,” Knight added.

The detective’s attention drifted away for a moment. To disobey Govicide had its consequences. Working side by side with them for two years chasing Hamilton proved that. Many subjects of the Masses were taken away when they were not forthcoming like the Agents wanted.

“Well, I hope I don’t have to wait all day.” Locke spied his watch. 9am.

“I hear the Director will be watching,” Knight raised a right bushy eyebrow.

The trembling, having been controlled inside of Locke, turned to shaking of his hands, Hamilton’s thick file writhing against his side. He put his limbs behind his back so the Guards would not notice.

His memories of the Director were vivid, still alive inside him.

His introduction to Govicide Director William Stallings occurred about halfway through the Hamilton investigation. Director Stallings had been upset Agents were still being found dead and he wanted answers. He had flown in on a Govicide jet to meet with Locke and others in Peace City on the Third Continent.

In the meeting, the Director had not minced words. His six-foot-five frame loaded with over three hundred pounds added to his intimidating performance. He warned all of them they would be breaking their backs and getting black lung in the coal mines of the WoodWill Mountains if Hamilton was not caught soon. He threatened to send every Agent, and Locke, to the bottom of the World where temperatures went well below zero. And he would make them wear shorts and t-shirts. He scolded the forensic teams, saying they were working against the OWG. He made fun of Locke saying Govicide should have never allowed a mere Homicide Detective to investigate this murder case.

During his tirade, Stallings picked up a table and threw it against a wall. The table exploded into a hundred pieces, a few shards landing close to Locke. Others hit some of the Govicide Agents, but they knew better than to complain. Instead, they all sat in their chairs, knees knocking together.

It was quite a show.

Luckily for everyone involved, not long after that they got their first breaks in the case. Hamilton killed six more Govicide Agents before being caught, but the team was close on Hamilton’s trail.

“Director Stallings, huh?” Locke stuck his lower lip, debating whether he should have accepted the Director’s mandate to interrogate Hamilton.

No, that was illogical. A mandate from Director Stallings could not go un-followed.

Locke backed up and pressed his shoulder blades against the wall opposite the interrogation room. The door had a square window, but he could not see Hamilton inside. He wanted to see Hamilton pacing around, worrying like he worrying. He wanted to see the top of Hamilton’s head pass the window with regular frequency as the killer did intermittent laps in the room. He wanted to know Hamilton’s hands were shaking like his own.

“Is it cold in here?” Locke rubbed his arm.

“No, Detective. Seems pretty warm to me.” Knight looked at Patterson for assurance.

This was not a cold chill. This was anxiety due to the prospect of facing a total mystery under the discerning eye of the Director.

Minutes passed. The guards talked between themselves. Locke ignored them. He cared more about how he would explain his lateness to his girlcomrade. He told Jade he

would be home by eleven that morning. That would not happen now. He thought about going back to the office and calling her, but what if Director Stallings called to say he was ready for the interrogation to begin?

Make the Director wait? Not a chance.

Instead, Locke found if he tensed up the muscles in his forearms he could make the shaking stop. Granted, his shakings inside continued. There was nothing he could do about those. But at least to the Guards he looked fine.

Turning his forearms into two solid logs, he brought them out from behind him. He opened Hamilton's file and looked for anything that might help him once the interrogation started. However, his memory alerted him to a different idea altogether.

What had Hamilton said?

"People have no rights when the One World Government is never wrong," Locke muttered, but not loud enough for the Guards to hear.

What did it mean?

Rights? Locke never heard of them. Right meaning correct? Right meaning the opposite of left? Right as in most subjects were right-handed? He played around with Hamilton's sentence using different definitions of the word but nothing seemed to fit.

Of course, the OWG was never wrong. Every subject of the Masses knew the OWG was always right—there was that word again—because the OWG gave everything to everyone. So, how could subjects be lacking something if the OWG provided everything?

Like a giant, fluffy cloud, the thought process enveloped him. No matter how many different ways he spun the words around he could not crack the code. A headache took hold at the base of Locke's skull.

About the time Locke lost himself in the smog of thoughts, Knight's walkie-talkie crackled to life.

An unfamiliar, female voice emanated from it. "The Govicide Director is ready. The interrogation may begin."

Scraping himself off the wall, Locke took one step toward the door. He had been so lost in his cloudy thoughts he lost track of time. His watch said 9:38am. Over a half hour had gone by while he fixated on Hamilton's statement and he had not even noticed.

Locke crossed the hall, wanting to see Hamilton's head glide by the window at least once.

Nothing.

Before grabbing the handle, he straightened his tie, feeling like he could strangle himself. That would be a first: a subject killing himself after having been given more than he expected from the OWG.

Well, if this was what happened under such circumstances, he hoped the OWG, including Govicide, would not do him any more favors.

CHAPTER 2

As in the hallway, darkness found a home in the interrogation room, collecting in the corners. A solitary light bulb hung seven feet above the dark green concrete floor. The OWG painter chose the same color for the walls. However, in this light, they looked black. A metal table dominated the center making the two chairs on either side look child-sized.

Hamilton sat in one of them.

Dressed in a black Govicide jumpsuit, the serial killer rested like a rock on the far side. The weak rays of the lone bulb stretched to reach him, shadows covering everything from Hamilton's ears back. His face, lacking a tan now, levitated in mid-air like a white mask.

Locke and the Govicide Agents tracked him for over two years. Yet Hamilton looked rested and clean when they found him on a sidewalk in Lake City last week. As one of the Agents put it, *He looks in better shape than we are.*

Now, Hamilton looked much like Locke expected him to look five days ago when caught. Scruffy and unshaven. Greasy, dark blond, short hair looking like it needed washed . . . twice.

But, these changes only accentuated the fact Hamilton was in fine physical condition. Perfect teeth. Perfect skin. No scars.

Locke glanced at the camera watching from the near upper right hand corner of the room, twelve feet above the floor, aimed at Hamilton like a sniper. Locke, still controlling his shivering through brute force, pulled out the empty chair and sat across from Hamilton, right in the male's gaze. The killer showed no reaction to Locke's presence.

"Hello, Hamilton? That's H-A-M-I-L-T-O-N, right?" He opened the monstrous file. "First name or last name?"

Getting out a pen, Locke hoped for an answer.

He did not receive one.

"You should know we checked the System for that name and found none. Nothing even close. Two billion subjects on this World and not one with that name. Why don't you just tell me your real name?"

He put the pen on an empty line in the file. Still no answer came.

The silence continued. Inch by inch, Locke moved the pen away from the paper. Maybe he needed to try something else.

"I'm Homicide Detective Michael Locke. You saw me last week when we caught you. I want to talk to you about our two-year Govicide Agent killing spree." Standing, he picked up the file, held it high, then let gravity bring it back to the table. It bounced twice, banging both times.

Locke blinked. Hamilton did not.

"You killed a lot of good Agents." Locke caught himself. From his location, the Govicide Director would be scrutinizing every word. "Allow me to correct myself. You killed a lot of excellent Govicide Agents. Agents who devoted their lives to making sure

the OWG can provide everything you need. Food, electricity, clothes, transportation, healthcare. These Agents were out there for you. And you killed them.”

Hamilton remained motionless. He blinked but it was so slow he appeared bored. The murderer’s mouth remained straight across as a line on a page, his eyes steady. Hands, cuffed to the chair, relaxed on the armrests.

Now Locke understood why he had not seen Hamilton thru the window. The cuffs. The prisoner could not have moved even if he wanted to. Unless he wished to drag the chair behind him.

“When I was first put on this case, I have to tell you, I was sure the first Agent, William Cardon, was murdered just by chance.” Locke circled to Hamilton’s side of the table. “Stuffing those OWG pamphlets down his throat until he choked to death was brutal. You must be quite a fighter. Agent Cardon was what? Five inches and fifty pounds heavier than you are?” From behind, he spoke into Hamilton’s right ear, taking the time to look up at the camera. “But when the second murder happened, all ideas of chance were thrown out the window.” Locke lowered his voice. “I think an OWG Statistician said the odds were one in several million that two victims in a row would be Govicide Agents.”

Hamilton did not move. With the camera on him, Locke did his best not to show signs of frustration, but the solid hold he had on his shaking hands was slipping. He backed away and circled in front of Hamilton, coming to a stop where he started.

“Maybe you should have murdered a few of the Masses in between the Agents. Then you might have been able to say these Agents’ deaths were just accidents. To only murder Govicide Agents? Big mistake. Now, nothing but a hanging awaits you.” Locke spun his chair around and sat in it backwards. He hoped the chair back would hide his nervous body.

Hamilton took a long breath like someone was reading him *The OWG Daily*.

“You can at least tell me why, Hamilton. Why would you kill these Agents who provide everything? Without the OWG and Govicide, there would be no clothes, food, electricity, healthcare, all of it. I mean,” Locke picked up the file and opened to the last murder, “why would you kill Barbra Bitner like that? Stacking all those OWG Manuals on top of her until she suffocated to death? She was out there working for you.” This time, Locke slid the entire file across the table to Hamilton. It stopped just on the edge of the table, one corner sticking out over the end. “Why, Hamilton? She was taking a nice, hot bath. You dragged her out into the middle of her living room and killed her. Why?”

If he had known the interrogation would go this way, Locke would have found a way to get out of this interview. Director’s mandate or not. This was embarrassing, like getting caught using your Sex Credits with another female. He imagined the Director sitting there, asking himself why he had allowed a Homicide Detective to interrogate the worst murderer in OWG history. His arms shook. The seat back would not be enough to cover them up at this pace.

And then Hamilton spoke.

“Did you say your last name is Locke? L-O-C-K-E?”

Hamilton’s mouth moved and the words came out. Just above a whisper, yet his voice bounced with more energy off the walls than Locke’s.

Locke’s arms stopped shaking. His back drooped. He was not a total failure. At least Hamilton said something.

“Yes. Locke. L-O-C-K-E.”

“You probably don’t know this because history before the OWG has been erased, but a famous person had your last name. One of us.” The killer’s mouth returned to a straight line.

“Locke? Really? What do you mean by “one of us”? Who is “us”? Who are you?” Locke pushed the chair closer to the table until the back of it touched the glistening steel, moving the table a sliver toward Hamilton in the process.

There was no response to his questions. Locke waited a reasonable amount of time before continuing. “Those words: person, people. They are un-mandated by the Exalted Ruler. We’re all called subjects. And you’re not going to make it any easier on yourself by using those words.”

No response. Locke felt the heat of the Director’s expectations radiating from the camera behind him. The detective needed to make this scene go somewhere before the Director got bored.

“As for the past, Hamilton, the time before the OWG is not important. There was nobody famous before the OWG. It was a time of anarchy and death and starvation. We can’t learn anything from those subjects who were inferior to us. Just as somewhere in the future, subjects will not find they can learn anything from us because we will be inferior to them. It’s called e-vo-lu-tion.”

Hamilton’s chest moved up and back, but at just a fraction of an inch. While Locke felt his own chest heaving against the seat back. Was the prisoner really less nervous than he was?

“Don’t you know, Hamilton? Only the OWG can determine who is and who is not famous. So, there couldn’t have been anyone famous before the OWG.”

He had heard about some hard luck cases, prisoners who seemed despondent during an interrogation, although Locke never encountered one. Hamilton was not even going to try to change Locke’s mind by blaming it on someone else--saying there was an accomplice or claiming he did not know they were all Govicide Agents. He was just going to sit there and listen.

This was not working. If Locke could not get Hamilton to breathe harder than he was, Locke needed a different plan, one that involved more force.

In a split second, Locke jumped from his chair and pushed it, screeching, across the room. It clanged into the corner below the camera, went up on two of its legs, and found its balance on all four again. Out of the corner of his eye, Locke saw Patterson’s face appear in the window. Seeing Locke was okay, his face disappeared.

Hamilton’s eyes had not followed the chair. They did not follow Locke jumping up. Like none of it happened.

Locke stomped around the table to Hamilton’s side, seemingly sure of himself. But, inside he questioned why Hamilton didn’t react to the outburst.

“Tell me how you’ve lived all these years with no record of your existence. Or how you traveled around the World without any record of using a bus, ship, or train? Planes are out of the question since a subject like you could never get on one.” One point he and Hamilton had in common. The only point. “How about your health? No record of you using OWG healthcare. No records anywhere, except of you killing all these Agents.” He reached down and slid the file back across the table, hard enough that it flew right off the other side. Hundreds of the pages skidded over to the door.

He would have to clean it up. All in good time.

“Do you see what color you’re wearing, Hamilton?” Locke grabbed the loose sleeve of Hamilton’s garb and twisted it. “That’s black. It’s not red. So, even though I’m in Homicide, you’re going to Govicide. You know what that means?” Locke shook the material back and forth. “That means OWG isn’t looking at you like some serial killer who could get five years in jail. No. You’re looking at an execution. Govicide is the only department that executes subjects. They’re looking at this as an economic crime--not a life crime. Killing Govicide Agents is an economic crime.”

Hamilton kept his gaze straight ahead, acting as if he was alone in the room. Locke gave his sleeve another pull then let it go. This was the farthest he had gone with a prisoner without striking him.

But that was next.

Locke pulled back his right arm and made a fist, scarred from years of use. Just as he was about to unleash it on Hamilton’s jaw, the murderer turned his head and looked up at Locke. His left eyebrow cocked up as if to say, *You aren’t really going to hit me, are you?*

The thought caused Locke to hesitate.

Then he noticed the absence of anything in Hamilton’s eyes.

No fear behind them. No anger, no sadness, nor hate. They were the same color as his jumpsuit. Bottomless black. So black, he believed Hamilton might not even feel the pain, like he was not human at all but a machine.

Would he even bleed?

The fist should have been flying by now. But Locke waited. It hung in the air, wavering like a child’s kite in a slight breeze. Hamilton did not look at it but kept his empty eyes on Locke’s. The two males glared at each other, a sea of loathing between them. But Locke felt his hate inside was ten times greater than Hamilton’s.

This was his chance and he was blowing it. Stallings watched and here Locke hesitated to hit a prisoner. And all of it being taped.

Locke’s conscience screamed, *Hit him!*

Don’t hit him, Locke’s rational side bellowed. He might just laugh. Remember what he did to all those Agents who were bigger and more powerful than you.

In the end, Locke sided with rationality. Allowing his fist to drift down until it relaxed at his side, he took a deep breath. How would he explain this?

“You know what?” Locke took a step away, “I’m going to allow Govicide to get the first punches in on you. The first cuts. The first broken bones.”

Those words warmed him, but he felt weaker, like he had broken a promise to Jade.

At least his arms did not shake anymore.

He looked up at the camera, hoping Stallings believed his fake explanation. Locke circled to his side of the table.

“If that’s how you want to play it, Hamilton. That’s fine. I’ve been patient, tracking you down for two years. You’ll have to be patient now until Govicide comes and takes you away. I’ll just move on to my next case.”

Locke turned toward the door.

“Do you ever think about the Pyramids?” Hamilton’s words slid out as if the last five minutes had never happened.

Locke spun around in place.

“The what?”

“The Pyramids.”

“What do they have to do with anything?”

“Everything. Do you ever think about the Pyramids?” Louder this time.

“Do I think about them? Not really. But I don’t make it a habit of thinking about buildings.” Locke moved forward so the light would fall on his face.

Hamilton shook his head twice. “Is that what they are to you? Buildings?”

“Yeah. Buildings made of stone and sand.” Where was this going?

“But they aren’t buildings. They’re burial sites.” The killer leaned forward as far as his shackles would allow him.

“Burial sites? Burial sites are un-mandated. It wastes OWG Land.” A fifth grade lesson.

“But they weren’t un-mandated when the Pyramids were built.”

“That’s not true.” With a mind of their own, Locke’s feet moved him over to the table once again. “Burial sites have always been un-mandated. And those Pyramids were built about forty years ago when the OWG--”

Hamilton laughed, his cuffs jingling in rhythm with his head.

“What’s so funny?” Locke felt a volcano inside him rumbling.

The murderer’s chuckle continued. “Those Pyramid burial sites are thousands of years old.”

Locke yelled, “Thousands! Thousands? Humans haven’t even existed for that long.” A second grade lesson. “It’s not possible the Pyramids are that old. Read any textbook.”

“Locke, you keep believing what you want. But do you really believe just fifty years ago buildings were constructed with stone and sand, yet everything else is made of steel and concrete? Doesn’t that sound strange to you?”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“Then how were they built? If it was just that long ago, how was it done?”

Locke got the feeling if Hamilton were not chained to the chair he would have folded his arms at the end of that question. The best Hamilton could do was flop his palms upwards.

No retort came to Locke.

“Nobody knows how they were built.” Hamilton answered his own question. “And your textbooks didn’t tell you. How could they have been built just forty years ago, yet no one can explain how they came to exist? Where are the building plans? Where are the people who worked on them? Where are the machines? Where did they get the stone from? Did your textbooks explain that?”

The textbooks had not. Locke tried to think of something to say but nothing came to mind. He did not want the killer to get the best of him. He wished he had hit Hamilton.

Too late now.

Hamilton took the silence to be Locke’s answer. “Detective Locke, if nobody can explain how the Pyramids were built, isn’t it possible they were constructed much longer ago than you were taught? And if the knowledge of how to build them has passed into oblivion over thousands of years but the Pyramids still exist, is it not possible that other non-material things--ideas, thoughts, ways of life--still exist but have also been forgotten?”

“You mean like . . . rights?” Before Locke could even think the sentence, it escaped, devoid of conscious mental control. Had Hamilton’s sentence from an hour ago left that much of an impression on him?

“Yes, exactly like rights.” Hamilton banged on the armrests. Life came to his eyes, settling them into a pale blue.

“But what are they?”

“They are something the OWG has taken away.”

Locke’s back cramped at Hamilton’s sentence. “But the OWG gives everyone everything. It doesn’t take anything away.” He straightened to ease the pain.

“But what if I were to tell you in the process of the OWG giving everything to everyone, every person loses his most important possession?” Hamilton drew in his lips. No red, just white skin. He opened his eyes wide.

Scratching his ear, Locke shook his head. “That makes no sense. And don’t use that “p” word again. You killed the Agents because of rights? Because they’re a subject’s most important possession? I’ve never heard of them so how important can they be?” Locke sat on a corner of the table, facing the camera. What did the Director think of Hamilton’s pronunciation? Maybe he knew what Hamilton meant by “rights.”

Silence took over Hamilton again. He returned to his catatonic state, looking straight ahead.

“What? Is that it?” If the file were on the table, Locke would have flung it again. Instead, he pounded the table. “Do you only talk in fits and starts? I thought we were starting to get somewhere.”

But Hamilton’s lips straightened, his eyes blackened, as if they never moved at all.

“I can see I’m not going to get anything but riddles from you. I thought I might be able to help Govicide figure out why you killed those Agents. Obviously, that’s not going to happen.”

Disappointment spewed from the volcano inside Locke. When Hamilton started talking Locke thought a breakthrough was imminent. Now, he saw it for what it was: lies and teasing.

Slipping off the table, Locke made it a point to avoid looking at the murderer again as he walked to the door. This was the end of a long two and a half year chapter of his life. An end he expected. He always knew he would catch Hamilton. But, he didn’t expect the chase to end with more questions than answers.

A list of questions that would go unanswered forever if this encounter was any indication.

Govicide would give Hamilton a go-around for an hour or so after they moved him out of there. If they got the same responses, the murderer would be dead by this time tomorrow. If he cooperated, he might make it two more days. Either way, sooner or later, Hamilton would be dead by Govicide’s hand.

Or rope. Or electricity. Or guillotine. Whatever method seemed fitting.

Locke opened the door. The guards could gather the file still strewn across the floor. He did not want to be in proximity to Hamilton for one more second.

One foot hit the hallway when a voice came from behind Locke.

“Detective Locke, don’t be so sure everything you see out in the OWG is exactly like it says. If the One World Government will lie about the Pyramids, it will lie about anything.”

Hamilton's voice lacked the energy of his preceding words. Just one more way he tried to provoke the detective. Just another way to torment Locke before they never saw each other again.

Locke would not acquiesce this time and kept moving, closing the door behind him. And slamming the last page shut on this chapter of his life involving Hamilton.

CHAPTER 3

The bus ride home was always the same. Locke took the 110 to the 230. The 230 to the 115. The 115 to the 117. The 117 to the 850. And then the 850 to the 330. The 330 dropped him off two miles from his living quarters.

He heard his transportation before he saw it. Although Locke was no OWG mechanic, it sounded like the engine on the bus wouldn't last to see another week. Like Hamilton.

It sputtered to the curb, a puff of smoke joining the city air, then dissipating. The driver kept his eyes straight ahead, not acknowledging Locke. Tired, the detective did the same in return, catching the operator's motion to close the door out of the corner of his eye. Locke slid his System card through the slot behind the driver so his location could be registered.

On a normal day—him remembering from two years ago--Locke stood for the entire ride. First come, first served. But today was different. Many of the plastic seats were empty, a factor of riding at a non-peak time.

Finding a cracked one toward the back, he slumped into it. With a jerk, a hum, then a stumble, the bus began its journey. A quarter of the way into the sky, the morning sun headed toward a cloud cluster. It would cook the terrain to just over ninety degrees before long.

Though his legs liked the break, Locke's mind continued to work. He stared at the floor just in front of him, seeing a spider dangling by an invisible string from the next bench. It swayed in a tight, slow circle in rhythm to the bumps on the street.

This was the way Locke's mind felt, like it was hanging by that same string. He tried to dismiss it as the long hours, days, weeks, and months catching up to him. But, a small part of him insisted it was something more.

And the small part was winning the argument.

It was Hamilton.

Block by block, Locke separated himself from the killer, but it felt like the murderer sat in the seat next to him. No, closer than that.

He was in Locke's head.

Shutting the door just a half hour before had only cured part of the problem. That was the easy part, physically not being in the killer's presence. Mentally though, Locke discovered forgetting Hamilton's case would take a lot longer.

This was a new feeling. All the other cases left his mind within minutes. By this time on his journey home after solving a case, Locke already began looking forward to seeing Jade, sometimes forgetting the murderer's name before boarding the fourth OWG bus.

Not now. Like a scratched record from one of the OWG's musicians, the details, locations, names, and Hamilton's words repeated over and over. And there was no one to turn the machine off.

He glanced out his window, only planning to break up his thoughts. A way to hit the refresh button.

But all the buildings in the distance mesmerized him mid-glance. Words from that broken record rotated inside him.

Sand and stones. Steel and concrete. Sand and stones. Steel and concrete. Sand and stones. Steel and concrete.

The Gambling City skyline had changed since the last time he gave attention to it. Now that he thought about it, when was the last time it attracted a look from him? Yes, he'd been gone for the last two years with only a few quick stops back. But even then, had he ever looked at it?

No, he didn't think so.

Then, how long was it? Three years? Four? Five since he admired the buildings?

Thinking about it, he turned his head to the other nine riders. Six males and three females. Two white like Locke. The rest of them mixed race. All had their eyes down, as if in deep thought.

Locke shifted his attention to the skyline.

The Red Casino was not red anymore, more of a drab maroon. And the "C" didn't light up. The Green Casino, when did someone break its windows? The Yellow Casino's white top had turned to gray. Why hadn't someone re-painted it?

A drop of sadness landed on his emotions then ran off. The OWG would fix all of those buildings when Govicide caught all the Offenders ripping it off. Those buildings would be perfect once again, Locke smiled.

Then, his frown returned.

All built within the last fifty years, as was every other building in sight. All of them built with known technology. Girders and cement. Rivets and welds.

Not one constructed with sand and stone.

There had to be a reason the OWG didn't use those materials anymore. Nestled in an OWG Engineer's book somewhere a legitimate reason spelled out why all other buildings were not like the Pyramids. Somewhere in the System the Pyramid plans existed.

Surely.

As Locke's eyes scoured each building, they stopped on the "O" at the end of the Yellow Casino's name.

That black O transformed into one of Hamilton's eyes.

The eye contact. That was it. That was the reason Locke couldn't let it go.

Specifically, the look Hamilton gave him as Locke raised his fist in the air.

In a piece of a second, Hamilton saw Locke's weaknesses but Locke saw none in the prisoner. Locke saw a mystery, but Hamilton saw a male.

Locke hoped the incident hadn't been so clear to Director Stallings. It didn't really matter. He'd never see him again. And, in a few hours Govicide Agents would arrive to take Hamilton away.

But even if they hung Hamilton, chopped his body up as they did with Offenders who committed heinous crimes, and burned his parts to ashes, Locke realized there would always be something intriguing about Hamilton. He managed to make it to about 30 years old outside the System.

The OWG claimed it wasn't possible.

Locke heard of subjects going outside the System. The OWG mandated the Masses to call these subjects Offenders. But these subjects always came back or got caught in weeks. Staying outside the System was too tough. An Offender had to feed himself. Take

care of health issues on his own. Find a way to get credits. Live on the street. Find transportation. The obstacles were too difficult for any human to survive.

Yet, Hamilton contradicted it all. The OWG Doctors found he had no health issues. On the day of capture he looked like any subject within the System. But miles better.

Hamilton was his own version. One of a kind. A mystery. Unique.

Like the Pyramids.

The thought popped into his mind. Locke dismissed it and moved on.

The interrogation couldn't have impressed Stallings. Locke doubted any difficult implications would come from not getting substantial information from Hamilton. Director Stallings couldn't have expected much more from a lowly Homicide Detective.

Locke taught the Agents how to analyze blood splatter patterns, preserve dead bodies, and other crime scene procedures. But, everyone knew Govicide had the best interrogators in the OWG. No other Department came close.

Locke's opportunity was a courtesy, nothing more, as explained to him by a Govicide representative.

But, Locke felt like he let this opportunity slip away. Aching regret scratched at him like a hungry cat. With Gates' confidence boost, recruitment into Govicide seemed possible. If those possibilities had existed, they were dead now, the result of Locke's failure to get anything out of the serial killer.

There would be no flying in jets. Or eating better food. Or getting an automobile. Or quicker healthcare. All the accommodations Govicide Agents received for making sure the OWG could provide everything for everyone.

He'd have to remain content working in his current position. He wanted to do so much more for the OWG. Without it, where would he and everyone else be?

Dead.

Bus rides, bus stops, and sprints in between, he trudged the last two miles. As was his habit, he avoided the sidewalk cracks, something he had been told to do as a child. It seemed there were more and more to jump as he got older.

He passed row after row of one-floor buildings built in anticipation of a spectacular future, much better than current times. Each building was gray, the color of the concrete. Paint would be added later, the color being whatever the Exalted Ruler picked.

Like the casinos, he couldn't remember the last time he really saw them. On the other hand, he couldn't remember a time when these buildings were not there. When were they built? Twenty years ago? Twenty-five?

None made out of sand. None made out of stone.

The only other subject he noticed was a male rummaging through a trash bin. If Locke had more energy, he would have reminded him his actions were against an OWG mandate. A Govicide Agent could arrest him for trash picking. But, Locke's steps didn't divert from their pre-planned path, too attracted to the bed awaiting him. The male would be caught sooner or later. No one escaped the OWG.

Except Hamilton.

Locke reached his first-floor living quarters. It looked like every other subject's in Gambling City. Built about thirty years ago, most were 900 square feet, the newer ones

being smaller than older ones. One sleeping area. One shower room. Eating area. And a common area containing a video communication device.

All subjects received their living quarters from the OWG upon reaching the age of twenty-five.

Fumbling for his keys, his weary eyes zoomed in and out at the keyhole. Had his living quarters been one more block, he might have lain down on the pavement to sleep. Finding the keyhole, he opened the front door.

“Jade?”

Jade peeked her head out from the eating area.

“You said you’d be home at eleven. What happened?” Her eyebrows formed a V over her hazel eyes. She darted back out of sight.

He knew that expression. Something was up besides him just being late without calling. “You know I was interrogating Hamilton this morning. Just didn’t go like I thought it would.”

Locke took seven cautious steps to the room’s doorway. Jade stood at the sink, towel in hand.

“It never does, does it?” She threw the towel on to the counter and marched toward Locke.

“What’s wrong?” He spun in place as his twenty-three year old, five foot three tornado whizzed past, destination unknown.

No answer.

Her mother was black, her father white. All subjects under thirty were of mixed race. The OWG mandated twenty-eight years ago subjects of the same race couldn’t conceive. It believed this the best way to make everyone even more equal.

Some day soon, in about fifty years, there would be no “pure” race of any kind. No more black and white.

Nothing but tan.

“If this is the way it’s going to be with me being around more, I’m going to start hoping for another serial killer.” He heard her land on the couch, like all of her one hundred pounds hit it in a freefall.

Something was definitely wrong.

Around the corner he followed in her wake, finding her facedown, sprawled on the couch. She was not long enough to stretch from one armrest to the other.

Locke stopped in the middle of the room. He hadn’t noticed until right then how her legs, clothed in blue shorts, were almost the same shade as furniture. “This seems like a big overreaction to me getting home late without calling. Trust me, I have a very good reason.”

“A better reason than being pregnant?”

Her voice muffled by the cushions, Locke didn’t catch the last word. To him, it sounded like “pungent.”

“Being what?”

“Pregnant. Pregnant.” She turned her head toward him, free of the pillows.

“Pregnant!”

“Pregnant? Who’s pregnant?”

“Are you *trying* to upset me, Michael? Because so help me . . .” Her voice faded as her face dropped into the pillows again.

“Wait . . . ,” his hands found a nice position on his hips, “. . . *you’re pregnant?*”

She answered by nodding, rubbing her nose deep into the fabric.

“Huh . . .” Maybe it was the result of being up almost twenty-four hours straight. Or, it could have been the interrogation still weighing on him like fifty extra pounds. Or, like most males, he just didn’t know how to react when his girlcomrade gave him this kind of news.

Or, maybe it was all three. But, “huh” was all he could muster.

He stood there, eyes moving around like they were following a fly.

This wasn’t bad news. Not by any stretch. He and Jade always planned to have a child at some point. More, if the OWG allowed.

But, given Jade’s behavior, there was more to it. He had a suspicion of why. “Are you positive?”

“I’ll take another test tomorrow to be sure. Those things can be wrong sometimes.” She revealed her tan face again, blossoming red from ear to ear. “But, pretty sure.”

Locke nodded once then sat down on the edge of the couch beside the small of her back. “But, there’s something else you’re not telling me, isn’t there?”

As she rolled on to her right side, he brushed her shoulder-length hair from her left eye. “Tell me, Jade. What’s the problem?”

With eye contact Locke would have loved under any other conditions, she answered, “I think we conceived during non-sex credit sex.”

On cue, his back teeth ground together like the gears in an old OWG bus. His suspicion was correct.

The Population Control Mandate--the Masses called it Sex Credits--started just a few years after the OWG’s inception. Fearing overpopulation, the first Exalted Ruler mandated it. Every month, each subject received four permission slips or “sex credits.” If subjects lived under the same roof together, the four slips counted toward both. As a couple had sex, they registered the acts via computer. After they used their four, they had to wait until the next month to receive four more. Four, according to OWG studies, seemed to strike a nice balance between restricting subjects’ emotions that sometimes caused males and females to act in un-mandated ways, and the need for the Masses to procreate to keep the OWG going. Un-mandating contraception also helped in controlling people who wanted to chance cheating the program.

However, Locke heard the program still had its issues. The lack of contraception didn’t stop all subjects from having un-mandated sex. The most the OWG could do was penalize subjects it caught having un-mandated sex. The penalties were severe. Sexual banishment for months was a given, along with a year’s restriction of the regular credits subjects received from month to month.

Getting pregnant during this kind of sex? The penalties were right up there with committing govicide. In fact, subjects caught conceiving during un-mandated sex seldom lived longer than a year after their punishment. Nobody could live without the help of the OWG.

Except Hamilton.

An abortion could get subjects back into the warm cradle of the OWG but most of the restrictions would continue. Either way, abortion or not, a subject’s life expectancy dropped by decades after such punishment. Suicide and starvation were eventually the two main causes of death.

All this ran thru Locke's brain in seconds, surprising himself he could recall the entire sex credit history but he couldn't remember when the buildings down the street had been built. Of course, sex credits were important. Buildings were not.

He rubbed his eyes, picking out something in the corner of his left one.

"You checked the computer?" Locke asked, tapping his right foot on the shag carpet, synchronizing it to his grinding teeth.

"Uh-huh. The test said I'm six weeks pregnant. And six weeks ago, we entered nothing. In fact, we didn't enter anything within two weeks on either side because you were away. We aren't gonna be able to lie. The System will know."

Locke smirked. "Now that you say that. I remember it. We did it—"

"--on the eating area counter top."

"Exactly."

"You just wouldn't keep your hands off of me." She shook her head.

"Don't start." He pointed at her.

"All hot because you were on the verge of catching that killer, Hamilton." The words flew at Locke fast.

"Don't give me that. You wanted it to do it as much as I did. Don't blame me." His pointer finger got a little too close to her nose.

She grabbed it. "One more inch and I'll break it. You know I'll do it."

Jade was not to be tested. He pulled it back and she let go. On a good note, the prospect of pain focused him.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry." Locke rubbed his eyes again. "Looks like we really let the OWG down." In saying that, it hurt more than any broken finger could, a dagger right to the gut. "Well, since we're loyal subjects of the OWG, we'll just have to take our punishment. The OWG gives us everything. What choice do we have?"

"Uh-huh, but I'm not sure yet. Those tests can be wrong at least twenty-five percent of the time. But, tomorrow, if the thing's positive then . . ." Jade's gaze fixated on the far wall.

"Maybe we can skip tomorrow . . ." His thoughts drifted away like a leaf on a stream. He fixated as well. But not on a wall. An idea, one that he could not put in words. He felt he was forgetting something.

Jade ruined the silence a moment later, "You never did tell me why you were late."

"Is that important now?" Locke asked, his lips almost curling into a smile.

"Try me. Anything to get this pregnancy thing out of my head."

He turned toward her as she leaned her head on the armrest. "Okay . . .well . . . I got to interrogate Hamilton like you knew I would."

"And how did that go?"

"About as well as you telling me about your pregnancy."

"Michael." She slapped him.

"The reason I was late was that the Govicide Director watched the entire thing from the headquarters in the District via a video camera. And I had to wait over a half an hour. I didn't start until like nine forty."

"The Govicide Director, really?" She grabbed his right hand.

"Yeah, but like I said. It didn't go so well."

"Why not? What happened?"

“Do I really have to tell you? I’ve been trying to get that killer out of my head for the last hour.”

“Yes, you do.” She squeezed his hand.

Where to start? “This male, Hamilton, was strange. There’s just something about him.” Locke scratched his chin. “I get the feeling this male has a lot to tell. Not just about why he did what he did but . . . it’s like he knows something.”

“Everybody knows something,” Jade responded.

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

Slipping his hand out of Jade’s, Locke stood up, all the Hamilton energy returning to him. Sleep seemed as far away as next week. He walked over to the computer then back.

“Like he knows something I don’t. No, that’s not right.” He shook his head like a bad taste sprouted in his mouth. “It’s like he knows something, a lot of things, the OWG doesn’t.”

“Nobody knows more than the OWG, Michael.”

“I know . . .” Another leaf on that stream. Just to say there was anything--let alone a subject--more knowledgeable than the OWG was grounds for imprisonment, just like having non-sex credit sex. Yet, Locke said it without hesitation.

“You’re just tired,” Jade answered, propping herself up on her elbows.

“He was talking about the Pyramids and how nobody knows how they were built. He said they’re thousands of years old.” Back and forth, couch to computer. Computer to couch he marched.

Jade laughed, sitting up. “Sounds like he should be in the OWG psych ward.”

“But he’s not. I know he isn’t. How could a nut have no OWG record of existence? Not one fact says he exists except he was sitting right in front of me. How could he move around the world with no effort? How could he eat, live, bathe, travel with no entrance into the System?”

“You know Offenders do that all the time.”

“But not for years. And really, he’s been doing it since he was born. It’s not supposed to be possible. Subjects eventually need the OWG. But this male didn’t.”

“If you ask me, he sounds like a Free Enterpriser.”

“Now who’s crazy?” Stopping mid-stride, Locke’s head fell to one side. “Next thing you’re going to say is the OWG Claus, the OWG Bunny, and the OWG Fairy are real.”

“The Free Enterprisers are coming after us.” Jade’s voice rose as she flicked her fingers at him. “We better watch out. They’re right outside the door right now.” She pointed to it. “They’re gonna come and take our medicine away, our electricity, our food-”

“Our sex credits?” Locke asked.

Jade’s smile disappeared.

That wasn’t the smartest statement he ever made. “Sorry, Jade.”

“I’m trying to forget about that. Just like you’re trying to forget about the Hamilton case. No more talk about either at least until tomorrow.”

Locke flopped onto the couch, the cushions swallowing him. “Those are the nicest words I’ve heard all day.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I’m so tired. I need to get some sleep.”

Jade escorted him to their sleeping room a minute later. He fell asleep on their bed still wearing his shirt, pants, tie, and shoes.

The phone rang like a bus horn in Locke's ear. He bolted up in bed, taking a quick look out the window. Night had fallen.

The phone rang again.

He looked at his bedside clock. 8:25pm. He could hear . . .

The phone rang a third time.

. . . the video communication device out in the next room.

Another blaring ring.

He rolled over to the phone on the nightstand.

"Hello."

"Locke?" It was Gates.

"Hey, Captain."

"Somebody just called me . . ." Gates left the sentence hanging.

"Yeah. Who?"

"Director Stallings, uh, wants to . . . er . . . talk to you." Gates tripped over his words, sounding as surprised as Locke became.

"Me? Why?" Locke rubbed his forehead, anticipating a headache on the horizon.

"What could he want?"

His regrets about his performance in Hamilton's interview stampeded in a tight circle just behind his forehead. If the Director wanted to talk to him, it could only mean his interrogation was even worse than he thought. He knew it hadn't gone the way he wanted but he doubted it was that bad. He wasn't a Govicide Agent after all. The Director couldn't expect him to perform to their level.

The punch . . . the thought echoed above the stampede . . . he should have punched Hamilton.

"It has to be about the interview today." Locke slapped the bed. "He's gonna give me a hard time about it. I knew it. Some deductions are coming my way."

"Well no, not exactly, Detective." Locke pulled the phone back from his ear.

Whatever the news was, it was bad enough to rattle Gate's cool exterior. "He . . . how do I put this? He wants you at Govicide Headquarters in The District tomorrow."

"What?" Locke caught the phone before it dropped out his hand.

"Locke? Michael? Are you there?" Gates shouted.

"Yes. Yes, I'm here. Just a little stunned." He put the phone back to his ear. "Why would he want me there to discipline me for my horrible interrogation? It doesn't make any sense. He must really be angry to use all those Goods and Services just to ream me out with me standing right in front of him."

"I think it is for another reason." No stumbling this time.

"Then what?"

"Detective, you worked for me for over twelve years. You are smarter than that."

Locke herded the regrets into a solitary corner and allowed his brain to work for a moment. If it was not for disciplining him, it could only be for . . .

"Could this be it, Captain? They want me for Govicide?" He fell back on to the cushions of the bed, pulling the phone cord to its maximum length.

“I think if they were going to do it, you would be a perfect choice. The way you handled yourself during the Hamilton case. The way you stayed on his trail despite not having the luxuries the Agents had.”

Gates made a good point. Many times Locke had almost given up, but once he latched on to a puzzle, a hint, a clue, he had a hard time letting go.

“What time does the train leave?”

“No train. Jet,” Gates answered.

Slapping the bed several times, Locke kicked his legs up in the air. “Jet? When does the jet . . . what do you they call it . . . take off?”

“Departure time is nine tomorrow morning. They said to be at the airport at eight forty-five. Go to the Govicide counter inside.”

“You ever been on a jet before?”

“Cannot say that I have. Probably never will, either. Must be a heck of a view from up there.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“OWG luck to you, Detective Locke.”

“Thanks.”

They hung up. Locke jumped up and pumped his fist. “Thank you One World Government. Thank you.”

Trying to control his emotions, he checked himself in the dresser mirror. He wanted to look good when he told Jade the great news. Tightening his tie then re-tucking his shirt, he tried to flatten the wrinkles. No success.

Jade sat on the couch. The VCD was on but she wasn’t watching it. Instead, she was reading the book, OWG Soup for the Masses.

“Hey, how did you sleep? Who was on the phone?” She looked up from her book.

“I slept well.” Sitting down on the couch beside her, he grabbed the remote and turned the VCD off.

“Hey, I was listening to that.” She closed her book but kept her finger on the page.

“Gates called.”

“What did he want?”

“Big news. Big, big news.” His cheeks hurt, trying to suppress a foot-wide smile.

“Are they going to let you pull the lever on the gallows to kill Hamilton?” The OWG often allowed the Masses to take part in executions.

“No. Govicide Director Stallings wants to see me at their headquarters tomorrow. In The District.”

“Why?”

Locke straightened his tie. “Let’s just say Gates doesn’t think they’d want me there for a bad reason. Govicide can discipline anyone from any distance.”

Jade leaned forward. “He wants to interview you to be an Agent?”

“Yep.”

“Oh my OWG, oh my OWG.” The book fell into her lap, her hands ending up on her cheeks.

Locke picked her up and they jumped around hugging each other.

“When do you catch the train?”

“No train, Jade. They’re flying me. I’m going to ride on a jet for the first time. I leave tomorrow morning at nine.” The travel plans amazed Locke even more when he reiterated them.

“See? You did great work with Hamilton today. I knew it.” Jade hugged and kissed him again. “You know what we should do?”

“Don’t you think we’re in enough trouble regarding that as it is?”

“Not that.” She slapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll quiz you from the OWG Manual. I mean, I’m never gonna be able to sleep now. Let me help you study. I think he’s gonna ask you questions about it.”

“That’s a great idea. You get the Manual and I’ll get out of these clothes. Meet you back on this couch in five minutes.” He kissed her and darted into the bedroom.

Not one of the Masses would consider this going overboard. Getting to work in the Govicide Department was the pinnacle. Even working as a Govicide receptionist or paper pusher in the Hall of Increased Mandates had tremendous advantages. The Agents, of course, were on the frontlines of making sure everyone received everything.

And Locke was only one interview away from joining their ranks.

CHAPTER 4

A few minutes later, Jade and Locke snuggled on the couch, the heavy OWG Manual in her lap. By mandate, the Manual resided in each nightstand across the World. Containing over 1000 pages of small print, Hamilton had used thirteen copies of this book to crush Govicide Agent Barbra Bitner.

Locke's and Jade's Manual was well-worn. Printed with the title, "OWG MANUAL," and a map of the World on the front, the black cover had faded to a dark gray from years of use. Theirs even showed spill marks from drinking while reading. At the bottom of the cover, still legible, was the OWG motto: Providing everything for everyone.

Govicide Agents, on unscheduled stop-ins, often checked the Manuals, making sure they looked like they had been used. The OWG expected the Masses to read at least a chapter of the book every week. If a Manual looked too "nice," the Agents gave on-the-spot quizzes to check a subject's knowledge. If the subject failed, credit deductions followed, along with a host of other penalties.

"Are you ready?" Jade asked, flipping the book open.

"Ready," Locke answered, rubbing his hands together, confident he would do well.

She thumbed through, stopping at a page near the front, "I'll start with an easy one. How'd Govicide get started?"

"Govicide, originally called the Department of Collections, came to be when the OWG got created. Year one. It made sure each subject gave his fair share to the OWG. Two years later, the name got changed to Govicide. Its name came from the idea anyone who tried to withhold credits from the OWG was trying to kill it. Thus, the term, Govicide. Just like homicide means the killing of a human. Govicide means the killing of the OWG." He smiled. "You're going to have to do better than that."

She pointed at him. "Oh, don't you worry. How many workers were in Govicide at the beginning?"

"Hmmm, a hundred thousand?"

"Close, a hundred and ten thousand. When did it increase to two hundred thousand?"

"Now, let me think about this . . ." Locke tapped his lips with his left hand. "When the OWG figured out the current economic conditions weren't fair. Back in year nine."

For the next two hours, Jade fired every question they thought Director Stallings might ask. Why did the number of Govicide workers go from two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand? Answer: It believed the World would be more perfect if it provided healthcare and electricity to the Masses.

Why did the OWG un-mandate sports? Answer: It caused the Masses to compete against each other and competition was not in the OWG's best interests. The concept of winners and losers became un-mandated a few months later.

Why did Govicide go from three hundred thousand workers to four hundred thousand? Answer: It predicted how happier the Masses would be if the OWG provided products like video communication devices and phones. In addition, these technologies

could help spread the OWG's tenets. It needed more credits to do so thus Govicide got bigger.

"What verse details why subjects cannot trade with each other?"

"Transactions 963:3."

"What paragraph explains why gift-giving takes six months?"

"Transactions 874:5."

"Procedures for turning a fellow subject in for un-mandated behavior?"

"Spying 302:2."

Locke knew the answer to every question. Of course, he had no choice, no subject of the Masses did. It was the only course of study, along with the OWG language, taught in OWG schools.

They took a break. Locke poured a glass of water while Jade made a sandwich of white bread and OWG peanut butter.

"You're doing better at this than I thought," she said. They reconvened on the couch.

"And how would you be doing?" Locke asked with a sideways glance.

"I'd have gotten most of these right . . . I think. I follow the mandates even though I might not understand the intricacies of why they make the World so good."

"Uh-huh," Locke answered, doubtful.

"I would," she shot back, punching him in the arm.

"Okay, okay," Locke put his hands in surrender. "Next question."

"How did the One World Government start?" Jade picked at her bread.

"In the beginning, fifty-two years ago, three wise males were able to harness the chaos of the World and bring order. No more fighting. No more starvation. No more subjects thinking only of themselves. Just subjects working for the common good. You want a more complete answer?"

"No, that's good enough for now." She flipped to the back of the book, hundreds of pages snapping against the hardcover. "What year was Govicide finally able to control every transaction on the World? And how?"

Locke folded his hands and searched for the thought. "Year 18. How? With the creation of the System which tracks all transactions and interactions through the use of our cards."

As Jade searched for the next question, he thought about the perfection of the OWG. How it made sure no one starved. How it made sure no subject received more than another, except for Govicide workers, of course. But, without them, subjects would starve, so it only made sense they got more than everyone else.

A smile came to Locke's face, growing with every word.

How the OWG delivered food to everyone's door. How subjects couldn't drive automobiles in order to protect World's delicate environment. How Offenders were tracked down by Agents and then hung at dawn.

Like Hamilton would be.

Locke planned to go into the interview tomorrow and come out being the first subject ever recruited into Govicide. He would be an Agent, making sure the OWG continued to provide everything for everyone. All subjects needed it.

Except Hamilton.

The smile changed to a frown. Pain shot up Locke's legs. His toes curled in on themselves. He turned away so Jade wouldn't see his demeanor change. Muscle by facial muscle, he turned his frown to a smile again, trying to wipe Hamilton from his mind.

Jade found her next question and continued, not noticing Locke's distress.

They finished up as the sun rose over Gambling City. He didn't miss a question. Whether his memory would hold up under the pressure of the Director's questioning, he wasn't sure. But, he was glad he'd at least get the chance.

In addition, Locke felt the two of them had bonded in reviewing the Manual together. Now that they had done it, he realized they needed it, considering he'd been away so much.

An interview with Govicide. Locke bonding with Jade again. Things were looking up.

"Gotta take the test again." Jade laid the Manual aside, inhaling and exhaling enough air to catch Locke's attention.

"What test?"

"You know . . ." She rose from the couch and pointed to her stomach.

Like a tidal wave, Jade's two words washed away his confidence, replaced with a pool of anxiety. His knee bounced. "Oh, right."

Locke followed her into the sleeping room then into the shower room.

"Michael, can I have a little privacy?"

"Sorry. I'm a little anxious." That was an understatement.

Jade shut the bathroom door behind her.

He plunked himself on the bed.

Could a subject be an Agent and have a girlcomrade who was pregnant through non-sex credit sex?

No way. Never. If she were pregnant, he'd slide to the entire opposite side of the scale from prospective Agent status.

But he waited, rubbing his glazed palms together and closing his eyes, asking the OWG for luck just this one time.

For fifteen seconds.

He couldn't stand it anymore. He needed something to expend his nervous energy.

The bed was still undone from his nap the evening before. He fluffed the pillows, flattened the sheets, and tucked the covers under the mattress into a tight wrapped box. But all the action did little to dissipate the anticipation of the next few minutes.

The toilet flushed.

"So, what's the test say?" Locke asked. Please be negative. Please be negative. Please be negative.

Silence.

Not good.

"Jade, what does it say?"

The handle of the bathroom door rotated and the door opened. Jade stuck her head out.

"It says I'm six weeks pregnant." They sounded like the worst words ever to come out of her mouth, as if each torturous syllable scalded her tongue.

And they scalded Locke's ears.

She shut the door remaining in the bathroom.

“Six weeks? Six weeks?” He slumped over but straightened when a spasm rippled through his spine. It ended in his neck muscles but the residual pain stuck around like earthquake after-shocks.

He crawled across the bed to their sex credit electronic date book and pressed the on button. Flipping back a few screens to six weeks ago, Locke saw what Jade said yesterday. If Jade conceived six weeks ago, they hadn't had sex credit sex within two weeks of the date.

“Uh, Jade. We got a problem.”

“I know.” Her words sounded like they scarred the inside of her mouth.

“The date book says we aren't even close. There's no way we're going to be able claim you conceived during Sex Credit sex.”

“What part of ‘I know’ didn't you understand, Michael?”

“Right . . . right.” He glanced at the electronic book one more time and shut it off.

Jade opened the bathroom door, knotting her robe. Any harder and she would have ripped it in two. Locke stared at the knot, thinking his insides felt the same way.

“So, what do you want to do?” he asked.

“Me?” Three quick steps and Jade joined him at the bed. “Me? Don't you put this on me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, Michael Locke. I don't think I do. Why don't you tell me?” she answered, folding her arms.

“What I mean is,” this felt like Hamilton's interrogation all over again, “the right thing to do is turn ourselves in like the Manual says.”

She sat down beside him. “Us. Together. Not me going down there by myself and ruining our lives. You're coming with me.”

Ruined their lives. That's exactly what they had done. No more Goods and Services provided to them. They'd be struggling in no time.

And Locke was this close to becoming an Agent.

Maybe there was another way out.

“You could get an abortion. Pretend like it never happened,” Locke pleaded.

She shook her head, “Don't get me wrong. If this were a mandated pregnancy, all on the up and up, I'd do it in a second. But, I know females who tried that. The abortion registers on the System. The OWG Doctors check to see how old the fetus is. They'll check our sex records and find out what we already know.”

“Right.” Answers, Locke, answers. There had to be a way out. “How about you just keep the fetus? Maybe when it's born they won't know when it got conceived.”

“They'll know. They always know. And if you think I'm going to carry this thing for nine months on the hopes of them making a mistake then you're the one who's mistaken.”

“It's better than nothing.” It seemed like such a good idea when he said it.

“Easy for you to say. You don't have to get as big as this bed in the process.” She held her hand out in front of her stomach, showing how big she'd get.

“Sorry.”

They sat in silence. Locke heard about subjects doing abortions on their own but every one of them ended with the female dying. He heard a story of a female convincing an OWG Doctor to come to her living quarters and perform one outside the System. They

both got caught, hung in the District a week later. For sure, no OWG Doctor would ever risk it again.

“I guess you don’t have to go to the airport after all.” Jade stated, laying her head on his shoulder.

Locke squeezed his eyes shut so tight his eyebrows almost touched his cheeks. He relived the last few days in seconds, knowing they’d be the last good ones he’d ever have. The Hamilton interrogation didn’t even seem so bad now.

“Hamilton . . .” It took Locke a few seconds to figure out why the name came to his lips.

“Hamilton?” Jade’s head rose from his shoulder.

“I’m the Detective who caught Hamilton.” His back straightened as a dot of hope appeared.

“And . . .”

He turned to her. “I’m the Detective who caught Hamilton, the murderer of fourteen Govicide Agents. And . . . I’m the first subject to ever get an interview with the Director. That has to mean something.”

“I’m not following you, Michael.”

Locke jumped off the bed. “I caught Hamilton. Sure, it was with Govicide help. But, Hamilton’d still be out there if it weren’t for me. The Director already let me interrogate Hamilton. Something no detective in the history of the OWG would have been allowed to do under different circumstances. Sure, it was just a courtesy. But maybe it was more than that. His invitation to the District proves it. Maybe the Director genuinely felt I earned that interrogation but couldn’t say it because Homicide Detectives are so low in the OWG. To say a detective earned something from Govicide, well, the thought alone would have to be un-mandated, right? So, who’s to say, my catching Hamilton couldn’t earn a one-time abortion with no penalties?”

“You think that’s possible?” Now Jade jumped up, her voice cracking with excitement.

“With the OWG, everything is possible. And Govicide makes it possible.”

And without it, everything was impossible.

Unless you were Hamilton.

This time the thought of the killer felt uplifting. Yes, the killer deserved the execution coming to him. But, maybe all his murders hadn’t been for nothing. Without them, Jade and Locke would have looked at extinction in a year’s time due to the penalties for a fetus conceived during un-mandated sex.

Now, since the Agents were dead, and Locke caught the killer, he was not any ordinary detective. He was not any ordinary subject. The OWG couldn’t penalize someone who caught the killer of fourteen Govicide Agents, could it?

This new line of thinking thrust Locke around the room. He tapped on his left thigh with every step, sure this could be the way out.

“I hope you’re right about this, Michael.”

CHAPTER 5

He'd seen the Gambling City Airport just a couple of times but not within the last five years. Or, had it been longer?

It looked the same as he remembered. Or did it? The outside was brownish-red like the rocks surrounding Gambling City. A section covering at least three acres remained under construction. Wasn't that part in the same condition the last time he viewed it? No, it couldn't be. The OWG never took that long to build anything.

The OWG bus dropped Locke off in the Departures area. Grabbing his bag containing a change of clothes, his Manual, and his five different pieces of OWG ID, he stepped down to the curb. The airport doors slid open when he got close to them. He'd never seen doors do that before. Many were built to do so but few ever worked.

Two airline counters greeted him inside: Govicide, and Goods and Services. The OWG mandated only the workers in these two departments were allowed to fly. All workers in other departments--Homicide, Manufacturing, Farming, Transportation, Entertainment, etc.—were banned.

No one stood in line at the Govicide booth. In fact, beside himself, only five other subjects could be seen, and they were all behind the counters.

"Hello, Govicide worker, where are you going today?" A young female, clad in her black uniform, asked. She looked Jade's age and ethnicity type. But she was taller and could stand to lose a few pounds.

"Uh, well, I'm not part of Govicide yet. I'm flying to The District for an interview."

Her eyes lit up. "An interview in the Govicide Department? I thought only subjects who passed the test got to be in Govicide."

"You and me both. But here I am."

"Your name?"

"Locke. Michael Locke. L-O-C-K-E." Locke thought of Hamilton spelling his name. And for a second, he wondered if Hamilton was still alive.

"I have it here. Michael Locke. Nine a.m. flight to the District. It leaves from Gate One."

"Gate? You have gates in this building?"

"Oh, sorry. You have not flown before. Gate means the area where you will wait to board the jet. There is no actual gate there."

Locke tapped his forehead, "Right. That would make sense."

"Not at all. Since you do not work for Govicide I should have known."

The female typed at her computer for a few more seconds.

"How long does a flight usually take from here to the District?" Locke tipped his head back, surveying the cavernous airport.

"Oh, no more than an hour and a half." She answered without looking up from her flat-screen.

"An hour and a half? But it's like two thousand miles from here." It took longer for him to ride the bus from his living quarters to Homicide.

"You are right. It is. But the SST flies at--"

“The what? The SST?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. The SST. Super Sonic Transport. It is a kind of new jet. OWG technology always moving ahead, you know.”

“Right, right.” He realized he didn’t hear the rest of her answer. “How fast?”

“Fifteen hundred miles an hour.”

“Fifteen hundred?” Locke’s fingernails dug into the plastic countertop. “Is it safe?”

She looked at him this time. “Oh, do not worry. We only have a couple of accidents a year. The chances of a crash are under one percent.”

“One percent? I guess I can live with that.”

“You are all set up, Mr. Locke. Go down this corridor, make a right, and up the steps. The gate will be on your right. Here is your paperwork.”

He grabbed the envelope from her. He looked at it. It didn’t make much sense to him.

Rolling his bag behind him, he admired the OWG architecture. Elevators, ramps, signs, arrows, and windows revealing the burgeoning day. Such a large, beautiful building but no more than ten subjects in it. Most of them airport workers.

An old thought came to him. The OWG always prepared for the future. It probably built the airport this large in preparation for the day when the Masses could fly. That would occur after the OWG solved the current population issues. It assured everyone the day was right around the corner.

Down the corridor. Up the steps. Locke followed the female’s directions. It looked like the steps used to move. They were called “escalators.” The OWG un-mandated their usage since subjects could climb the stairs with their bags. The electricity running the escalators could be used to provide more Goods and Services. Locke wished the escalators were in operation, but he realized his human irrationality was getting the best of him.

Reaching the gate, Locke found a bank of empty seats. He sat in one near the door leading out to the jet. An SST, he corrected himself. If he hoped to be a perfect Govicide Agent, he had to start using the correct terminology. Super Sonic Transport. Some smart OWG Engineer must have come up with the name.

Locke admired the SST, parked ninety feet away, through the bay window. Painted all white, it gleamed in the sunshine, although it looked like at one time there was a red and blue design on it. The front of it--the nose, he thought OWG Engineers called it--bent down but looked like it could be raised. The wings were triangular and the engines sat under them towards the back.

The jet exuded motion even while standing still. Locke never had been so close to such a great technological achievement. This was what the OWG could create if the Masses followed its mandates and Offenders didn’t get in the way.

His attention turned to the airport itself. Locke counted twenty gates in this section. All empty. Locke assured himself every gate would be filled with the Masses going places on SST’s when the OWG got the World Population under 1.5 billion, the OWG goal. Less subjects, more Goods and Services for everyone. Flying included.

Two males in black uniforms appeared at the gate. One of them slid a small card through a slot in the door leading out to the SST. Not noticing Locke, they disappeared down the hallway. The door clicked shut behind them.

Just after that, two mixed-race, fresh-faced females came out of the same door. Both were cute, but neither could touch Jade's beauty. Dressed in uniforms like the males, but with skirts. They noticed Locke waiting.

"Mr. Locke?" The shorter one asked.

"That's me." He sat up in his chair.

"I am Melanie. This is Megan."

"The plane is ready," Megan added.

"Great. When is everyone else getting here?" He pointed to the empty seats.

"You are the only passenger today," Megan answered. "Do you have your paperwork?"

They led him to the counter. "I'm the only one?"

"Yes," Melanie this time.

"The plane is so big. Seems like a little much for just me."

"Govicide provides everything we have here." Megan motioned to the jet, the walls, the floor, the chairs, and the doors. "So, Govicide workers deserve everything they get. Including this SST."

Who was he to argue?

After taking a minute to check his five different ID's, they guided Locke through the door and down the hallway to the waiting SST. The jet engines idled on the other side of the wall. They shrilled more than grumbled. He couldn't imagine how loud they would be going at 1,500 mph. Locke took one last step, and he stood inside the jet.

Several times nicer than his living quarters, his first impression made him feel like he wasn't inside a plane at all. He anticipated the SST would be filled with seats. Instead, from the front way to the back, it held ten seats with a few couches mixed in. Cabinets adorned each side of the interior. Video communication devices were situated at various points, five in all. The soles of his shoes sank into a thick, black carpet.

If this is what it was like to be part of Govicide, he liked it.

He spun toward the front of the jet where the pilots drove the plane. The two uniformed males he saw earlier--the pilots--called it the cockpit. Funny name. Dozens of gauges, switches, knobs, and dials covered the walls and ceiling. Two computer displays were out in front of the pilot and his assistant.

Locke gulped. He thought an OWG bus dashboard seemed complex. This one looked ten times more so.

The pilot must have noticed Locke's demeanor. "It is not as hard as it looks."

"That's good to know," On the verge of hyperventilating, Locke tried hard to ignore the pilot's apparent age. He looked younger than Jade. Locke would have liked someone a little more seasoned.

Locke tapped Megan on the shoulder. "Anywhere?"

"Anywhere you like," she replied.

Picking a seat next to a window overlooking the left wing, Locke put his things behind it. The seat was leather, a unique substance allegedly made of cow skin. Locke found the fact suspect since he had seen a few cows and their skins didn't look like this at all.

The attendants showed him how to fasten his safety belt and minutes later the plane backed up out of its slot. In the next minute, it stopped, rotated to the left, and made its

way out on to the runway. He clutched the armrests so tight his fingers ached. Megan, seeing his distress, nudged Melanie and pointed. They giggled.

Rising to a level even higher than during the interrogation, Locke's self-consciousness slipped out of control. He rubbed his backside in the seat to get more comfortable, but it only made him feel more awkward.

Megan whispered something to her counterpart then unbuckled her belt. Steadying herself, she walked back to a seat near Locke and sat down.

"You look terrible. You are not going to throw up, are you?"

Locke tried to smile but his teeth ground against each other instead. "No, but I may rip these armrests out." The words brought a vision of Hamilton handcuffed to the chair.

She laughed, rolling her eyes. "You will be fine."

The engines screamed under him. The SST lurched forward and didn't stop. Locke tried to stay upright in his seat, but the acceleration pushed him into the leather, little by little. Sure that the plane was out of control, he peered out the window at the dotted lines on the runway. They became a solid, white line as the plane picked up speed. The solid white line got farther and farther away. Thinner and thinner.

The World fell away.

The SST flew on a southeast course away from Gambling City. He watched the buildings become no bigger than pebbles. The roads turned into gray strings laid out on the world. From the air, the intersections of these highways looked like leaves of a clover. The bodies of water went from blue to a greenish-brown. The plane flew over the Large Canyon, a large crack in the World caused by a hundred years of erosion.

The greens. The browns. The reds.

Rectangles. Squares. Circles.

He noticed something else: All the wide-open spaces. How good it was the One World Government started population control. If it hadn't, all this beautiful land would be covered with subjects in no time.

Megan rose from her seat. "You can get up and walk around if you like."

He might have tried but his hands wouldn't let go of his seat. "No. I'm fine. For now."

"Okay. But try not to break those armrests." She returned to the front of the SST and joined Melanie.

Looking up to the sky, he noticed its color had changed. A hint of black tinged it now. The sun warmed his face through the porthole-like window, similar to the ones on all those ships. He squinted to see more of the World.

Down on the ground, tiny patches of gray and black sat among the greens and tans. These were the other cities and towns across the First Continent. He didn't know which they were, but he knew the subjects living there did their best for the OWG.

A thought came to him: The Govicide Agents traveled this way all the time during the Hamilton investigation while he hoofed around on trains, buses, and ships.

He couldn't begrudge them. They earned it. He hadn't--yet. They were saving subjects by doing the Govicide's work. It stood to reason they received all this luxury. The Agents rode these SSTs because without Govicide everybody would be worse off. The Masses would be dead.

Except Hamilton.

Him again. Not even flying miles above the World in luxury could get the killer off his mind. How had he done it? How could he manage to stay alive without the OWG?

The door to the cockpit opened and both pilots emerged. Locke didn't think it possible but he found a way to strangle those armrests harder. Who was flying the plane?

The pilots and attendants made small talk then the younger pilot from earlier walked back to Locke.

"Detective Locke, is it?" the pilot asked, standing in the aisle.

Locke ignored the question. "Who's flying the plane?" He strained to look around the pilot to see if the other one returned to the cockpit. There he was, still talking to Megan and Melanie. He needed to get back in the cockpit . . . now.

"The auto-pilot," the young, dark male answered, smiling.

For the first time since the SST left the ground, Locke released the armrests. He felt his breathing return to a feet-on-firm-ground pace. "Whew. When I got on the plane I saw only two of you. I didn't know there was a third pilot."

"A third pilot? There is no third pilot. Just the two of us."

"You just said the auto-pilot is flying the plane." Locke once again looked around the pilot in front of him.

"It is. But it is not a human. It is a computer." The pilot laughed.

"A computer?" Had the window next to Locke been on a slider, he would have opened it and jumped out. His claw-like hands found those tortured armrests again. He breathed in deep so as not to faint.

"We do this all the time, Detective Locke. Mandated procedure. You should not be alarmed."

"Well, I'm alarmed." Locke nodded as fast as his neck would allow. "How about you and the other pilot put your hands back on the controls?"

"I just wanted to come back to see how one of the Masses was enjoying the flight. That day is coming soon for all of the Masses."

"Yes, yes, we all know that. How about you make sure this subject gets to his destination by going back up to the cockpit?" Locke pointed toward the front of the SST, his finger shaking like he'd been electrocuted.

"Okay, of course. Sorry to make you so nervous." The pilot touched Locke's shoulder then proceeded to the cockpit. The other pilot followed.

Once the door shut, Locke allowed himself to take a breath again. He shook his head. How stupid were those pilots to put this SST under the control of computers that everyone knew were unreliable? The one in Locke's living quarters crashed—he forgave himself the pun—on a weekly basis. The OWG foresaw a day when very few would malfunction. Until then, the Masses had to put up with the errors.

Locke flexed his hands and cinched his safety belt. The hands then went right back to the arms of the seat.

Gathering his thoughts, he tried to remember where his mind was before the pilot gave him the scare of his life.

Hamilton.

No combination of factors accounted for Hamilton's robust physical shape. Hamilton was unexplainable like the Pyramids. If those buildings were truly unexplainable.

Was there some kind of parallel there?

The Pyramids were unexplainable. Hamilton was unexplainable. The Pyramids existed, but no one knew how they were built. Hamilton existed, but no one knew how, since he'd never been in the System. The Pyramids were one of a kind. Hamilton likewise.

But, Hamilton was also an anomaly. An aberration. A deviation. An oddity. No ideas could be formed from his existence because he was just one subject. Compared to the other 2 billion subjects on the World, he meant nothing.

But Locke couldn't turn this thought pattern off. He remembered Hamilton's pronouncement, *People have no rights if the OWG is never wrong*. He didn't know what rights were, but he wondered if it were true, could the opposite also be valid?

He tried rewording it out loud, "If subjects have rights, then the One World Government could be . . ."

Locke didn't complete the sentence. To finish it meant completing an un-mandated thought. The OWG was never . . . that word. The W-R-O-N-G word. Spelling it was the closest he could come.

Re-arranging the words, the phrasing, the syntax, and the punctuation, Locke began to feel like he was on to something. The fascination-and fear-of flying ebbed away while the fascination with Hamilton increased.

As the flight reached its mid-point, Megan joined him, interrupting his thoughts.

She brought a drink with her. "Here. Try this."

"What is it?"

Folding out the tray in front of him, she set the glass down. The liquid bubbled in the solid black cup. "It is called Goca-Gola." She sat down in the seat across the aisle.

Taking a sip, a needle-like feeling filled his mouth. It left when he swallowed. "Hey, what's that . . . I don't know what to call it."

"Fizz," she answered. "Pretty neat, huh? You will not find any of the Masses drinking it. Exclusive to Govicide."

He took another sip. Same feeling. "I know. I'm one of them."

"Oh, right. I forgot." Something caught her attention behind his seat. "Do you always take your OWG Manual with you everywhere?"

"Thought I might get a little studying in."

"Studying? For what?"

"I have an interview with the Director. I might become the first subject of the Masses to become a Govicide Agent."

Megan turned toward Locke, crossing her legs. Her manicured eyebrows rose a quarter of an inch. "An Agent? Really? I did not think it was possible."

"Well, it's not. But I'm the Homicide Detective who caught Hamilton."

"You caught the male who murdered all those Agents?"

Taking another sip of his drink, he nodded. "Yes, with Govicide help, of course."

"I had no idea, Detective Locke . . . hopefully future Govicide Agent Locke." She bit her lip for a moment. "Would you like some help studying?"

"Uh, sure."

Megan popped up from her seat like it became as hot as a stove. She seemed a little too energetic. Grabbing the Manual, she sat back down before Locke had time to decipher her motives.

“Wow, your Manual is really used. The cover on mine is still black.” Megan ran her left hand over the cover.

“Then, I’d say you better start using it a little more,” Locke answered.

“Where do you want to start?” she asked leaning in toward him, close enough for him to smell the scent of her shampoo.

“Uh, just pick a page. We’ll do it randomly.”

“Do it?” Megan turned her head just a few degrees to one side.

“Huh?” He missed the reference at first. “Oh, uh, no.” A warm feeling descended from the top of his head to his toes. No matter what was going on with him and Jade, he would never use his sex credits with another female. “You can ask the questions randomly.”

She examined him for a moment, up and down, an inch at a time. He pretended to not to notice but his jiggling toes spoke volumes. “Hey, a female has to make sure.” Megan opened the book in the middle. She ran a painted fingernail down the page. “Why did the OWG un-mandate voting?”

“Because elections use up credits. These credits can be used for Goods and Services. And the Masses want those more than elections anyway.”

“Exactly, Michael.” She touched his right arm, making his neck hair rise. “Good answer.” She flipped to another part of the Manual, further toward the back. “Why is there only one news station?”

Recollecting himself by moving his right arm further away, he answered, “That’s an easy one. News reporting takes up credits. Even if more news outlets existed, it would all be the same information anyway. So, it makes sense to only have one station. This way, credits can be used for more Goods and Services. And the Masses like Goods and Services more than news.”

Megan bobbed her head like it was attached to a rubber band, but her eyes stayed fixed on Locke. “That is so true. I watch the OWG news, of course. It is mandated. But I love my Goods and Services more.”

“Me, too.” Locke felt her examining him again. He guessed this was how an OWG donut felt in front of Captain Gates. “Next question.”

She re-crossed her legs. “Okay, here is a good one. Why do younger subjects receive more Goods and Services than older ones?”

“Because older subjects take up too many credits. They’ve had their time on this World. It’s time for them to die so the younger subjects can take over.”

“Good answer, Michael. Good job.”

“The OWG is perfect. What can I say?” Locke shrugged.”

“You are so smart, Michael. I know you are going to do great in this interview.” Megan grabbed his bicep and squeezed, leaning over even further than before.

“Thanks.”

Locke found himself having a harder and harder time looking at Megan, even though most males would have found her attention flattering. Subtly, he edged himself over to the far side of his seat. His upper body pointed toward the window. Now he needed to look over his shoulder to see her. Her flirtations increased after he mentioned the Agent interview. It wasn’t surprising. Agents were at the top of the OWG World, next to the Director and the Exalted Ruler. Any female, or male, would do anything to be in a relationship with one.

But there was no way he'd ever use his sex credits with another female beside Jade. He was lucky to have her. Given her looks and disposition, she could have done much better than a Homicide Detective. Even after they met, she had a chance to go out with a Govicide Agent. She passed it up. A very rare occurrence. Agents never got turned down.

Plus, he was in enough trouble regarding sex credits. No need to compound the problem.

"Next question," he demanded, thinking her last stare had gone on long enough.

She paged through the Manual. "Why is cash un-mandated?"

Locke was about to answer when Melanie called from the front of the jet. Breakfast was served. Knowing Megan would be going back to work and not in his vicinity, Locke's body relaxed.

"I have to go but maybe we can talk some more before we land . . ." The tone in her voice ended the sentence as a question.

"Uh, sure." Locke tried to smile, but it emerged as a wince.

"Great." Megan put the Manual back behind the seat.

Five minutes later, the meal arrived but it was not like any breakfast Locke ever ate before. A yellow blob dominated the black, oval plate. Vegetables and meat stuck out of it. Megan called it an omelet, made with eggs she said. He had eaten eggs before, but hard-boiled only. How many yolks did it take to make a meal this size?

On the plate, toast and sausage joined the omelet. The sausage was new to him as well. He could get used to this. No wonder those Govicide Agents looked plump during Hamilton's investigation. They were getting fed like this the whole time while Locke scrounged up whatever he could between bus and train stops.

When he finished, they came to take his plates away. Megan stuck around a little too long to make small talk, holding the dirty plates. But during the meal, Locke's mind had begun to stray to more important matters than a flirtatious and opportunistic flight attendant.

Hamilton.

Megan, maybe sensing Locke's head was elsewhere, excused herself to continue with the dish cleaning. She assured him she would be back.

Don't rush back, he wanted to say.

He reached behind his seat and opened the OWG Manual. After a few minutes, he realized he was looking at the words but not reading. His mind obsessed on the murderer. An overriding question stuck in his head: Why hadn't Hamilton died outside the System? The OWG professed every subject of the Masses would never survive without its help.

Instead, the OWG Doctors professed he was about 35 years old, but he possessed the body of a 20-year-old. Blood Pressure: Normal. Cholesterol levels: Normal. The OWG Dentist added Hamilton had no cavities since his adult teeth came in. That, in particular, was unheard of even with fluoride in the OWG water supply. The dentist also noticed Hamilton had, at one time, worn some type of device to straighten his teeth. The One World Government un-mandated such devices since they used up too many credits.

Hamilton shouldn't exist. And, even so, he shouldn't have been in such good shape. The killer Locke interrogated shouldn't have been across the table. Hamilton should have been a figment. A rumor. A fabrication.

But he was real.

The contradiction nibbled at Locke's nerves.

Would the Director ask him about this?

Probably. And Locke had no answer.

One positive point was the Director didn't hear Hamilton yell the sentence in the Homicide office. The one with the word, "rights" in it. No telling where the interview would have gone if the Director had heard it.

What did it mean?

Right-handed? "Right" meaning "correct?" "Right" as the opposite of "left?" "Right" meaning "to fix a wrong?"

Locke let it go and moved on. The only relevant point was that the OWG Manual contained the truth. Hamilton or not, the Masses would die without all the OWG gave them. And the OWG would go to any lengths to provide everything for everyone.

The ground got closer and closer. The land got greener and greener. The ride got bumpier and bumpier. Locke got a feeling in his stomach like when an OWG bus went over a bump too fast. Were they crashing?

The flight attendants sat back down in their seats and strapped in. Locke began to identify the bigger buildings. Then the smaller buildings. He noticed living quarters. Soon he could distinguish subjects.

They were all getting too close too fast.

Yes, the plane was going down. Out of control by Locke's amateur assertion. He was seconds from screaming.

Just as terror convinced Locke this was not a landing but a crash, the SST passed over a fence and he felt the wheels touch the runway. He had seen planes land before and it looked violent. But this felt like jumping from the bottom step of a staircase to the ground.

Locke leaned his head back, feeling his heart rate slow down just like the jet on the runway.

When the SST came to a stop, he unbuckled himself but didn't stand. His legs weren't quite ready for it. The fronts and backs of his legs tugged at each other, shaking them back and forth.

As the others prepared to leave, Locke felt an obligation not to lag behind. Wobbly legs and all, he pulled himself upright, supporting himself with the seat back. He gathered his things.

Just as he feared, Megan waited for him with too big of a smile.

She stuck out her hand. Even though she made him feel uncomfortable, Locke couldn't help but shake it. As soon they touched, he knew he'd made a mistake. Disguised in her palm, he felt a folded piece of paper.

"I hope we will soon be calling you Govicide Agent Michael Locke and bowing to you. It was a pleasure having you on this Govicide SST today," Megan's fingertips caressed his wrist.

"Thank you for a great first flight. I admit I was scared. But not as much as I expected," Locke lied.

She wouldn't let go of his hand. "Maybe we will see each other again . . . soon?"

This female just didn't get the picture. "Maybe." Locke pulled his hand away but kept his mask of politeness on. "Bye now."

When he pulled his hand away, she pushed the paper into his. He had no choice but to grab it. He stepped off the plane, remembering he had no idea where to go next. He turned to Melanie, noticing Megan's eager eyes.

"Do you know where I can get an OWG bus here?"

Melanie answered, "Why do you need an OWG bus?"

"I have to get to my interview."

"Mr. Locke, nobody going to Govicide rides a bus. I am sure there is a limousine waiting for you right outside the airport." Both females laughed, Megan taking the opportunity to touch Locke one more time.

"A limousine?"

CHAPTER 6

Locke followed the arrows through another deserted airport, giving Megan's piece of paper one glance on the way. As expected, it was her phone number, seven digits in all. He threw it in the first trashcan he saw.

After getting lost once, he finally stood on the curb face to face with a driver holding a sign saying, "Locke."

"That's me," Locke pointed to himself. The driver, wearing a black suit similar to an Agent's uniform, seemed unimpressed, putting away the sign and saying nothing.

The limousine crouched in its spot. Black and shiny, long but shorter than the buses Locke rode. But it was out there. Locke guessed between seventeen and twenty feet.

It seemed to belong to another time, like it was too old for the OWG. From the tiny, metal statue sticking out from the front to the wheels with shiny spindles in the center, it gave off an aura opposite of the futuristic SST.

And it grumbled, leaving Locke to wonder what powered this automobile. A jet engine? The Gambling City buses idled without a sound. They came alive when provoked by the driver. This limousine seemed to have a life of its own even with no one inside.

The driver opened the back door to the limousine. Locke stepped down and in, taking his bags with him.

Like the SST's, the interior of this automobile was nothing like he'd ever seen. Video communication device. Phone, he couldn't remember the last time he saw a phone outside a building. A refrigerator and a bar with OWG Non-Alcoholic Liquid. The seats, leather . . . again. The windows were so tinted he could barely see The District skyline while they pulled onto the highway.

Locke had never been to The District before. The OWG recommended, but did not mandate, every subject of the Masses to come here at least once. Few could, given their work hours making sure the OWG continued to operate.

But, thousands still managed to find their way there. Many walked from hundreds of miles away, just to see the District once before leaving the World. Locke heard the trip gave those subjects a renewed and stronger belief in the OWG.

Seeing the skyline gave Locke a wholly different feeling. Dread.

Locke imagined the Director sitting in Govicide Headquarters waiting for him. Lining up his questions. His insights. His accusations. He would see every flaw in Locke. What if he read Locke's mind and found Jade's pregnancy?

No, not even the Director could do that.

Locke picked at the leather beneath him, thinking this was all a mistake. He couldn't be a Govicide Agent. They were too tough. Too perfect. Too skilled.

And he was just a detective.

But, being an Agent could be the only way to escape the pregnancy trouble.

The thought steeled Locke.

They came upon the Chamberlain Monument. It was a tall white column, alone at the peak of a small hill. As if a preprogrammed computer, the driver spoke, “The Chamberlain Monument is just over five hundred feet high. Chamberlain was the first Director of Govicide. He said: The One World Government is reason; it is eloquent; it is not force.”

As soon as the Monument was in the rearview mirror, the driver returned to his silence. Locke waited for more words. None came.

“Know your monuments, do you?” Locke asked.

No response. The driver kept his eyes straight ahead.

Minutes later, they passed the Carter Memorial. It was white as well but not tall like the Chamberlain Monument. Pillars surrounded it along the outside with steps leading up to it. A dome capped its roof.

Once again, on cue, the driver spoke. “This is the Carter Memorial. A statue of Thomas Carter, third Director of Govicide, is inside. Carter once said: A wise and lavish One World Government, which shall leave males and females not free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall take from the mouth of labor the bread that it has earned--this is the goal of Govicide. After that quote, Govicide began controlling all economic functions to make sure the OWG provided everything for everyone.”

Not only did the driver’s mouth seem to turn on and off like a computer, he sounded like one as well.

“That’s interesting,” Locke responded. “What’s your name?”

No acknowledgement.

Was he like this with all his passengers? The driver couldn’t get away with this if an Agent attempted to talk to him.

Maybe the Agents didn’t talk to him?

Locke pondered while the Schultz Memorial appeared in the distance. Built like the Carter, it had a flat top instead of a dome, a bit more rectangular as well.

Locke saw the driver’s mouth open and an idea pushed him in a split second.

“I’ll take this one, driver,” Locke yelled out. “Eric Schultz kept Govicide together through some of its roughest times, those days before the System came online. His quote: The OWG will never be destroyed from the outside. If it falters and subjects lose their entitlements, it will be because a lack of Govicide destroyed it.” He cleared his throat. “That quote in a time of crisis gave everyone hope and allowed Govicide to grow larger and stronger.”

As much as he wanted to, Locke didn’t laugh. Instead, his insides got to feel the joy alone. And his interruption provoked a reaction from the driver. Was that a scowl Locke saw in the rearview mirror?

Just when Locke thought about giving the driver another shot at conversation, Govicide Headquarters appeared in the distance. The view brought everything back into focus. And that steeling of his confidence he did minutes ago began to melt.

This building had a similar construction style to the Carter and Schultz Memorials but dwarfed them. Pillars. Dome. White blocks. Two large sets of stairs climbed straight up the front. Large wings on each side of the dome-covered center extended out at least three hundred feet in opposite directions. The building possessed many windows, even in the dome of the center section.

Locke didn't appreciate the size of it until the limousine dropped him off in the front. Everyone felt small in the presence of Govicide. Now, Locke felt small in the presence of its building.

The driver walked around the limousine to open Locke's door but Locke was way ahead of him, exiting the automobile on his own. Noticing this, the driver spun right around and marched back to his door.

"Where am I going?" Locke asked.

The driver didn't say a word but pointed toward the stairs. He sped away before Locke reached the first step. His confidence melted further upon touching it.

It became a puddle a minute later when he reached the top step.

He looked up to see the tall dome seemingly leaning out over him, looming like his impending interview. This was a mistake, the sweat on his back proved it. He was not supposed to be a Govicide Agent. That had been decided when he failed their test so many years ago. It didn't matter what the Director said, whether he decided for or against Locke.

Locke searched for someone, anyone. But no one else was there on those steps. Not one human he could talk to. Not one human to ask if Locke had any other choice than to open the door in front of him.

But, their answer would be what Locke already knew. He had to do this. The Director mandated it.

The reception area echoed like the airports, no furniture except for a solitary counter centered under the dome. Had OWG movers forgot it and left it there? Locke leaned his head back. The sun came through the tiny windows and made complex patterns of light and dark on the plaster. The rest of the lobby mirrored all the luxury the SST and limousine possessed. Granite floors, deep red wood for walls, covered by tapestries from OWG artists.

As he approached the counter, much to his surprise, a female sat behind it as if hiding. He couldn't see her from the front door. She didn't raise her eyes when he peeked down at her. A magazine, the OWG Enquirer, kept her attention.

"Hi, I am here to see Director Stallings."

"Sign in." She pointed to a pen and paper and pressed a button to the right of her telephone. She did this all in one fluid motion. Not once did she look at him.

Locke signed-in, noting no one signed the sheet since last week.

"Not many visitors, I guess?"

Nothing.

He turned when he heard a clicking approaching.

"Detective Locke?" The voice sounded neither nice nor nasty.

The clicking came from the heels of female over six-foot tall, thin with no curves. Dressed all in black—shirt and pants—per Govicide requirements, she wasn't ugly but she wasn't pretty. Pure white skin with ink black hair. Locke guessed she was in her forties.

"That's me."

She extended her hand. "Welcome, I'm Leona Zell, Director Stallings' assistant. Please follow me."

He recognized her voice—the female on Knight's radio from the day before.

They shook hands and Ms. Zell strode off toward a bank of elevators. Locke hustled to catch up, dragging his things behind him.

“Quite a building you have here. Of course, I have my picture hung in my living quarters as mandated. But I did not expect it to be this--”

“Big? We get that a lot.”

They reached an elevator. Ms. Zell pushed a button, lighting it up.

“And how was your flight and limousine ride?” she asked him. Her tone indicated she already knew the answer.

“Great. I knew Govicide Agents traveled well but what an experience.”

“You’ll get used to it. That is, if you pass the Director’s interview.”

Yes, the interview. Locke backed up against the wall, once again remembering why he was there. It was almost too easy to forget with all the elegance around him. The Director sat just a few floors away.

“You don’t do a very good job of disguising your anxiety, Detective Locke.”

“Was it that obvious?” Locke wiped his palms on his dark blue pants, double-checking to make sure the sweat didn’t leave a stain.

She raised a thin eyebrow.

The elevator “dinged” and the door opened. Ms. Zell entered first.

They ascended to floor number three, neither saying a word. Ms. Zell faced the doors. Locke stood behind her, grabbing the railing so his nerves would not crush his legs. The elevator creaked and rocked like a cradle back and forth.

He examined her, not out of attraction but due to curiosity. There was something about this female. Something Locke sensed before but could not place. It wasn’t her posture or her clothes. Nor her perfume, she wore none. Her movement? Her body language? Her--

Ding!

The door opened and what greeted them differed one hundred percent from the lobby. Young males and females, all dressed in black similar to Ms. Zell, scampered to and fro. All of them carried stacks of papers. They seemed on a mission and were late getting there. The sound reminded Locke of a flock of seagulls he heard the one time he visited the beach. Ms. Zell waited a second then stepped into the maelstrom. He was quick to follow, not sure if he could keep up.

She navigated the obstacles with experience. He did not. Several times he bumped into a Govicide worker headed somewhere, apologizing each time. They glared back. Through it all, he managed to keep Ms. Zell in sight. If she had been shorter, he would have lost her. She maneuvered around desks, chairs, wastebaskets, and disassembled computers, not touching one. He hit every object he passed.

She was waiting for him when he reached her, arms crossed.

“Is it like this all the time?” he asked between labored breaths.

“Detective Locke, it takes a lot of work to provide everything for everyone.”

She opened a door and entered. He followed glad to leave the chaos behind.

Quiet. Empty. Elegant. The next room lacked any “office feeling” at all. With walls made of dark, reddish wood, it resembled the lobby. Paintings he’d only seen in pictures hung in the center of each panel. Each illustration depicted, in figurative terms, a scene from OWG and Govicide history.

One was a rendering of the OWG coming together, with thousands of subjects kissing three rings with “OWG” etched into them. The title of the painting: Ultimate Control.

Another painting showed Govicide collecting the last piece of cash from an Offender. The Offender smiled, realizing how much his contribution helped the OWG provide for everyone. The artist depicted Govicide as a handsome male, frowning and shaking his finger at the ugly, common subject. This title: We Know Best.

The third depicted the Armies of Govicide in black banishing the green-clothed Free Enterprisers off the World. The painter--Locke couldn't remember her name--showed the Free Enterprisers—creatures with horns, claws, and big noses--falling off the World while the model-perfect Govicide Army pushed them. This one: Victory.

The Masses could be so artistic when the OWG mandated.

The room was furnished with pieces he'd only seen in books. All of it seeming too beautiful or too delicate to even sit upon. Swirls in the paint. Faces in the carvings. Names of former Govicide Directors and Agents etched on the seat backs. Stained glass replaced the ordinary glass in the tabletops. And all of it bathed in beautiful sunlight streaming in through a bay window on the far left side of the room.

Ms. Zell, unfazed, led him to another door opposite the one they entered. Grabbing the knob, she checked her watch. Her hand let go of the knob.

“We're early. The Director mandates timeliness. Not early. Not late. On time.”

Hearing the words, “the Director,” Locke's left foot retreated a half step and his head felt woozy. He steadied himself by leaning against the wall near the Victory painting. He let everything he brought slide to the floor, bringing the OWG Manual was proving more of a pain that he thought.

“Anxiety hitting you again?” She took a step toward him, her hand reaching out.

“I'm alright. It's been building since I got the call from my Captain.” His stomach didn't feel good either.

“Well, it's now or never, Detective.” She checked her watch. “It's time.”

CHAPTER 7

Stallings led the way out through a backdoor, ordering Locke to follow him, but not close. Descending eight flights of stairs, they were underground by the time they got to the bottom. Passing through one security door with Stallings' security card, he allowed Locke to go through first.

This door opened into a room the size of a theater, which could have fit three SST's. Over one hundred workers sat at control stations with headsets and microphones. They pressed various buttons on the workstations in front of them.

Twenty by thirty foot screens, double-stacked, covered the massive front wall. Ten in all, they changed from one set of numbers to another. Numbers flashed across the screens. Green and red arrows pointed up and down. Every few seconds the screens changed to different colors with more numbers.

Stallings grabbed the microphone clipped next to the doorway. "Govicide Agent Locke, the wall to your right is ninety feet high by one hundred fifty feet wide. It is curved so the screens covering it can be seen and read from anywhere in the room."

Even with the speakers, Locke had a hard time hearing the Director's words. Clicks from switches, hums from the computers, red buzzers, and the workers' interactions muffled the Director's strong voice.

Locke walked to his left toward the back of the giant room. He shouted, "What do all the numbers mean? All the arrows? The green and red?"

"The screens display various numbers with accompanying maps showing where a One World Government economic crime is taking place. Go ahead. Walk around," the Director commanded. "If you have ever wondered why each product and ID on the World has a barcode, this is it." Stallings coughed. "When the product gets scanned, the information goes right into the System's program. Food, bicycles, rakes, clothes, all of it. They all appear on one of these screens. For services, like healthcare, your OWG ID gets scanned in. We know everything every subject has and we know what the Masses are doing. All scanned in real time. Sex credits, too."

Of course, sex credits, Locke mused, his legs locking up then relaxing.

He walked along the left side to get a better view at the large screens.

Stallings couldn't be seen over the banks of computers and workers, but his voice emanated from the speakers. "Everyone. This is Govicide Agent Michael Locke. He is the first subject recruited into Govicide. He worked on the Hamilton case as a Homicide Detective but now he is one of us. Stand up and give him his first bow."

The System operators, in black pants and short-sleeve shirts, stood up and did as instructed, the room becoming quieter than a dead Offender. In unison, as if choreographed, these males and females with different heights and physical make-ups started and ended their bows at the same time. Perfection.

Locke took a step back from them, knowing how the Exalted Ruler must feel when out in public. This was too much for him. Too much attention. Too much respect. Too much admiration.

He didn't deserve this. He was a flawed subject. Jade's pregnancy proved it. He couldn't be trusted to follow all of the OWG's mandates. So, how could he enforce them?

But, the Director wanted him in Govicide. And that meant the Exalted Ruler had signed off on Locke's promotion as well. And they were perfect. They never made any mistakes.

So, standing in front of these workers couldn't be a mistake.

It was meant to be.

He sucked it in. It filled him with a warm feeling like the one on his first date with Jade. All self-consciousness disappeared.

He could get used to this.

After the brief bow, the workers returned to their duties. The warm feeling flooding through Locke's chest didn't diminish. He hoped it would stay with him a long time.

"Govicide Agent Locke, what you see on these screens is the System. The System is everything. Everything with the exception of what is in a subject's head. But, we can infer what a subject is thinking by tracking what that subject uses. Every transaction, every bus ride, every channel on a television, every Sex Credit charged . . ."

The Sex Credit information flashed up on the nearest screen.

". . . every un-mandated trade between two subjects, every vegetable cooked, every abortion . . . it is all here. We know what everyone is doing at any time by the tracking devices we have on clothing, transportation, edible and inedible goods, video and audio communication devices, et cetera. This is truly the only way we can make sure everyone is behaving for the greater good."

Locke stopped opposite from the door he entered. The screens flashed like strobe lights from one topic to another.

Stallings continued, "A subject gets on an OWG bus, swipes his card. A subject goes to work, swipes his card. A subject goes to an OWG Doctor, swipes his card. A subject has sex, swipes his card. Your OWG education taught you all this, correct, Agent Locke?"

"Yes, sir, it did," Locke shouted back, not sure if his voice was loud enough.

"Good. We had the old System. You are probably too young to remember it. It used video cameras. Cameras in living quarters. On street corners. On buses. Subjects watching Subjects, the OWG Marketing Department called it," the Director laughed.

The Director was correct. Locke had no recollection of this old System. Looking at what was before him, it was not a huge step to see how this one was better.

"There were problems . . ." Stallings stuttered. "Too labor intensive. A camera worker could only watch ten screens at one time. And many crimes against the OWG were missed. To improve it, OWG engineers created the Subject Improvement System--the System, for short. It needs a lot less subject power. Computers do all the analysis. Workers like these in this room do the monitoring and Agents enforce the OWG mandates."

The red and green arrows. The blue and red numbers. The purple and yellow charts. Every pixel tracking a product. Every program tracking a service. Every Agent tracking an Offender.

"With the addition of the World Position System a few years later, the System has become one hundred percent accurate. In a few more years, with every subject of the

Masses swallowing a stomach-acid resistant WPS device, the OWG will know where every subject's location at a moment's notice making it even more efficient."

Leaning up against the wall, Locke's eyes panned from one to the other, capturing every color and screen change. Complexity and simplicity at the same time. Complex because of the amount of different variables. But simple because it made sense: Controlling the subjects by controlling the goods and services. A subject couldn't do something for his own interest because anything he would use--a good or service--was tracked. A subject could only make so many decisions. He had very few choices. And when a subject had few choices, he was predictable and controllable.

A perfect subject of the OWG.

"These controllers watch for errors." Stallings hacked once again. It sounded like he was coming down with something. "If an offense pops up, the controller calls a scheduler. The scheduler records it on a calendar so we know when it happened. Of course, the offense is also stored in the System's memory. A dispatcher alerts an Agent who investigates. You would probably be surprised, Agent Locke. We do not have the number of govicide crimes most subjects think. Granted, early in the OWG, we did. But a few executions of subjects was all it took to convince everyone of the genius of the System."

An irrepressible grin, stretching like an Offender on the rack, spanned Locke's face as he watched the screens flicker. No one could get away. Maybe they could for a short while but the System was too powerful.

Except Hamilton.

Locke resisted the thought.

Hamilton got caught.

But by Locke and Agents, not the System. Even to this day, Hamilton never appeared on the System anywhere.

The grin grew wider. Yes, Locke, for one moment over a week ago, was more powerful than even the System.

Then, he frowned, his body leaning even more into the wall. These screens would expose Jade's pregnancy if he couldn't come up with a plan. A red number or a red flashing arrow would pop up and soon his fellow Govicide Agents would be at his door. They'd drag him and Jade away for questioning. And punishment.

"For example, that top left screen at this second is profiling subjects watching the OWG News Channel . . ."

Stallings' words faded into the background as they took on a whole new meaning. This was no longer a tutorial on how the System worked. No longer an explanation of how the beauty of it kept the OWG in control. No longer a lesson in how the OWG watched over its subjects.

Now it was a diagram as to how Jade and Locke would eventually be caught. Every red arrow and red number stalking them until they had the two cornered. In his own words, even though Stallings knew nothing of their predicament, he was telling Locke how the end would arrive. It would come as a red arrow, a red number, and a red buzzer on one of the worker's workstations.

Within seconds, all the screens changed to a whole new set of criteria. Then, ten seconds after that, they switched again. The screens had a kind of rhythm. They were the pulse of the OWG. Beating. Thumping.

And nipping at the heels of Locke and Jade like a predator.

Locke rotated and flexed his ankles at the thought.

After all these years, Locke finally got to see the System. Like many others, he had tried to visualize it. Everyone was aware of it, but due to the size it was difficult to understand how it worked. The Masses could only see the scanners, the barcodes, and the cards used to access everything.

The System was like a jigsaw puzzle. A subject could hold one piece knowing it was part of a giant puzzle but not understand what the final picture looked like. Even having one hundred pieces of a thousand piece puzzle wouldn't help.

And the puzzle picture for Locke and Jade was one of penalties and unavoidable death.

Fear filled him starting at the back of throat. He struck it down with one swallow. He'd made his final decision to stay silent when he didn't fess up to the Director earlier. No use going back over covered ground.

He would find a way out.

Stallings' words faded back into his consciousness, "... this is just one control room of many across the World. This is the main one since this is Govicide World Headquarters. The mainframes, the supreme program, et cetera are kept here. But, there are four similar rooms on this continent. And another fifty spread out over the World. All the information they collect comes back here." He hesitated. "I am going to talk to Ms. Zell for a moment, Agent Locke. Continue to observe."

Locke circled back toward the main door, this time under the screens. They were hung above him like giant sails pushing the room forward. The room didn't have any lights, other than small lamps on a few consoles. The lights off the screens were enough to keep the hangar-like room well-lit.

Examining the controllers' work for a minute, he watched their eyes dart from one set of buttons to another. Up to the screens then back to their consoles. Many talked into the mikes attached to their headphones. Another group chattered on phones attached to their desks. A few others observed the screens as if under a trance.

This was the way to do it: Complete coverage and complete control. As much as Locke despaired, knowing he could be a future target, he couldn't deny this was the way to run a civilization.

No way for a subject to strike out on his own and leave everyone else behind. Locke understood why Offenders who tried to get around the System got caught. These subjects were not truly getting around the System. They were falling straight into the System's trap. They thought if they were alone they couldn't get caught.

They were wrong.

A controller jumped up, the glasses falling off her face. "We got one. There are two video communication devices operating in this subject's living quarters but the System says he only has one."

At once, two other controllers came to her side. They spoke in hushed tones. Locke stepped closer, trying to hear them, but he caught none of their words. After a few frenzied seconds, the controller sat back down, picked up a phone and dialed.

A Govicide Agent would knock on that subject's door within the next day. Locke imagined himself doing the same. Flashing the badge. Asking to see the video

communication devices. Scanning their bar codes to see who received them after the OWG manufactured them.

Subjects could be clever, though. Offenders found ways of making fake barcodes out of paper and ink from computer printers. They could make it appear, in this instance, that both devices were legitimate, gluing a fake barcode over a real one. If an Agent wasn't thorough, the Offender could slip by.

Offender John Smith would give his device to Tom Brown. Tom Brown would make a fake barcode in his living quarters, placing it over the real barcode. If scanned, it registered as Tom Brown's, the Offender claiming the System made a mistake. John Smith, the Offender without a video communication device, would say his broke and he threw it away.

If the Govicide Agent was lax and didn't check all records, Tom and John could get away with the crime. Granted, if the Agent followed the paper trail, there would be several indications Tom Brown forged the barcode. But the barcode would pass if a Govicide Agent were only making a spot check of subjects' equipment.

Not that trading was impossible. If a subject filled out the thirty different forms and waited a year for the OWG to examine the economic impact of such a trade, then the trade might happen. Very few were approved, though.

Locke sauntered over to the door he first entered, craning his neck to see the screens.

Stallings, having returned, waited for him. When Locke got close, Stallings propped open the door, then started up the stairs well ahead of Locke.

"So, Agent Locke, what did you think?" the Director asked when he reached the top of the first flight. Locke heard the wheezing twenty feet away.

"Magnificent. Unbelievable," Locke answered, a half flight behind.

"That is what all Agents say when they see it. It works, does it not?"

"Absolutely, Director Stallings. Perfection."

Stallings stopped at the next landing, looking down at Locke. "Originally, we needed ten times as many workers and screens to track everything. But now, the Masses have become," Stallings rolled his eyebrows, "conditioned. They do not get out of line as much." Stallings cracked his knuckles and coughed, echoing down to Locke. "With fewer subjects trying to get around the System, less is needed to monitor them. The total conditioning of the Masses is nearly complete."

They climbed the rest of the way in silence, except for Stallings' wheezing.

"Are you alright?" Locke asked as soon as they reached the interview room.

Stallings stood at the window again, this time facing Locke. "Nothing getting to the front of the OWG Healthcare line cannot fix."

Locke noticed some objects on the edge of the table that were not there before.

"I commanded Assistant Zell bring in the tools of the trade." Stallings pointed to the table. "The Govicide badge. As you are aware, no other object is capable of scaring a subject like this one."

Locke grabbed it, not quite snatching it off the table. It felt warm, like it had been sitting in the sun. Or, maybe it was the excitement flowing out of his fingertips.

The badge was palm-sized, shaped like a gold, five-pointed star. It said, Govicide, in capital letters across the middle. Locke ran his fingers along its edges. "I remember the first time I saw one of these. I think I was fifteen. Two Govicide agents flashed their badges to a comrade of mine. They asked questions about the boy's father and what the

male had been doing because he kept popping up on the System's screens." Locke suppressed a vision of this happening to him and Jade. "My comrade told them everything he knew like a good subject should, though it wasn't much. I can't remember the specifics. But, days later, those Govicide Agents took the dad away. Nobody saw him again. My comrade got over it within days."

Locke expected a smile on Stallings' face. Instead, he saw a concerned look. "You mean the Agents did not take your comrade in as well?"

"No. They didn't." Why was he asking?

"Hmmm, our policies have changed since then. We take in the whole family now. Do you know where your comrade is?"

"Kind of lost track of him. Can't even remember his name," Locke answered.

"Well, if he pops up, bring him in." The tone in Stallings' voice could have cracked solid rock.

"Okay, I will." Locke nodded, his head bobbing a couple times too many.

And with Locke's answer, Stallings smiled again and the tone disappeared. "Your satellite phone . . ."

Locke hung on to the badge while he picked up the phone. He'd seen only a few of these. Far fewer than Govicide badges.

"These phones have the capability to take calls no matter where an Agent is," the Director told Locke. "Bouncing off satellites the OWG launched many years ago. Agents get them. Subjects do not. They make Govicide more efficient. You will notice that as soon as you are out in the field."

It was no bigger than Locke's hand. A small antenna stuck out one side. He played with the buttons.

"And last but not least, your scanner," Stallings pointed.

"I've seen these. You push the button and a red beam comes out, capable of reading any barcode."

The scanner looked like a stun gun without the large battery. It was bigger than the phone and much heavier.

"You have everything you need to enforce the OWG's mandates now, Govicide Agent Michael Locke."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you. I won't let you and the OWG down." Only if I don't get caught covering up my girlcomrade's pregnancy first, Locke wanted to add. He smiled. Stallings probably thought it was due to Locke's excitement of becoming an Agent. But it was because Locke found a way to joke about the worst circumstance of his life.

If nothing else, it was progress.

"I am sure you will not let me down. Your partner will meet up with you in Gambling City. He will bring your Agent clothes with him. He is working on a special project. I am sure you can help him. He will give you the details." Stallings coughed one more time.

"I'll be happy to meet him." Locke's first thought: Would this partner give him any insight on how to get out of the pregnancy?

"He was the partner of one of Hamilton's victims. In fact, it was the first one, William Cardon. His name is Govicide Agent Alex Hiss."

Locke shook his head. "I can't say I remember the name."

“You two should work well together.” Stallings started toward the backdoor, keeping clear of Locke. “He has been with Govicide since his eighteenth birthday. He is fifty-eight now.”

“A forty-year veteran? I’m sure he’ll teach me a lot.”

Locke and Stallings said good-bye to each other, without shaking hands, of course. Out through the exquisite waiting room. Into the buzzing office. But this time, when the workers saw Locke, they stopped as if someone hit the “pause” button. The chattering. The clacking footsteps. The keyboard tapping. It all halted. And just like the System workers, every single worker bowed to Locke. Once again, in unison.

This time, he had no feeling of being overwhelmed. Just thanks.

He waved his right hand as he paraded past them, dragging his luggage behind. The only sound? The squeaking of his bag’s wheels.

Locke heard them go back to work as soon as the elevator doors closed.

Zell waited on the ground floor. She noticed Locke’s badge, phone, and scanner. “I see you passed Director Stallings’ test.”

“What test?”

“You admitted you failed on your original Govicide test, right?”

“Yes, I did. I had to.” Locke shrugged his shoulders.

“If you had tried to defend yourself, he would have dismissed you right there.

Director Stallings wants everyone to realize that admitting their errors is the way to a true understanding of Govicide, the System, and the OWG. They exist to perfect us and defending one’s self against the Director is neither fruitful nor advised.”

“I have no doubt.” Locke took in the lobby of the building, not knowing when he would be there again. And, if he were, would he be in chains or not?

She led him to the front doors and opened them. “Your limo is here. And remember, Govicide Agent Locke, we’re counting on you.”

“Thanks.” He left the building, pausing to turn around and examine her one time more time. There was something about her . . .

The door closed on her but Zell remained there. Just as he decided to walk back to the door to see what she wanted, she walked away.

Was that the behavior of someone who knew something? If Zell somehow knew about Jade, she would’ve told the Director. But she couldn’t know anything, could she? Maybe as a female, she guessed Jade getting pregnancy tests weren’t a preparation for the future like Locke told the Director.

Maybe Zell knew females got those test because they needed them now. But, wouldn’t she tell the Director that?

Strange.

Locke descended the stairs, Zell’s last glare etched on several memory cells.

The return trip to Gambling City was a blur. Limousine to airport. Airport to plane. No flirtatious and opportunistic flight attendants. No wondering why the airports were so large. Or why he was the only Agent on the SST.

He was a defender of the OWG now. A defective defender but a defender nonetheless.

No matter. He would find a way to fix the defect.

Everything faded to the background when he ran his fingers over the badge, the phone, and the scanner. He felt as if power flowed through them, sending a surge of heat

through his body. The badge's points were sharp, claw-like. The phone, advanced and efficient. The scanner, accurate and deadly.

He was the first, the first to fail the test and be an Agent anyway. He couldn't fail the Director. Whatever special project his new partner was working on, Locke planned to do whatever it took to help. Anything. Anything to keep the OWG providing everything for everyone.

He would give his all for the OWG until either it found out about the pregnancy. And if it didn't, and he found a way to get around it, he would work even harder until his life ended.

But there was still the problem of Jade. Locke had no idea how he would tell her. She wasn't going to like the idea he chickened out. She would just have to understand and believe he could find an escape hatch.

However, a speck of unease crept in, like a nagging worry he forgot to turn off the stove after leaving his living quarters. Was there an ironclad way to satisfy his desires—being an Agent and solving Jade's pregnancy—that he was forgetting?

The answer was right there. But it was like his inner thoughts couldn't focus on it. And its origin was a mystery.

When he exited Gambling City airport, a limousine waited for Locke. This driver had the same demeanor as the one in the District, few words and no emotion. Locke gave up trying to start a conversation within a block of leaving the airport.

When the limousine got close, he dialed his living quarter's number. The line rang twice.

"Hello."

"Hello, OWG honey, guess where I am?"

"Uh, you're still in the District?"

"No."

"You're at the airport waiting to leave?"

"No."

"I give up. Where are you? How did it go?"

"Look out the window and I'll show you." Locke answered, trying to be serious.

Locke jumped out and leaned against the limo. In a few seconds, Jade poked her head out from between the curtains. She saw him and squinted for a second then her eyes went wide. She disappeared from the window.

She came out the front door screaming and ran over to him, jumping into his arms. They kissed, long and hard. The limousine driver stood watching, staying silent.

"You got it. Didn't you? You got it," she said between heavy breaths.

"I did. Are you going to bow to me?"

"Girlcomrades of Agents don't have to bow, even I know that. But . . . I'll do it once. But only once." She bowing, hands clasped together, then jumped back into his arms.

He kissed her again, spinning together until they both got dizzy.

"Let me show you the tools of the work." He put her back down.

Locke ducked back into the car. He handed her the badge, scanner, and phone.

She admired all three. The badge seemed to attract most of her attention. She pressed the buttons on the phone and the scanner, similar to Locke's initial reaction.

“This is a phone? You were talking to me on this?” She held it up to her ear and then looked at it again.

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t think a phone like this was possible. You can go anywhere with it?”

“It even works on the jet. I mean, the SST.” Locke turned to the driver. “So, how does this work? How do I reach you when I need a ride?”

“Dial zero on the phone.” The driver’s voice was lower than Locke expected given his thin stature. “Either myself or the other driver will be here in under a half hour, Govicide Agent Locke”

“I like the sound of that. Well, I’ll call you tomorrow morning. Have to get some things at Homicide.”

The driver climbed into the limousine and pulled away.

“Strange male,” Jade mentioned as she watched the automobile leave.

“Yeah. You aren’t going to believe the stories I have for you.”

Hand in hand, Locke and Jade strolled up the sidewalk to their living quarters.

CHAPTER 8

Long shadows crept into the living quarters by the time Locke finished telling Jade about Govicide Director Stallings, the Govicide Building, the SST ride, the District, the Monuments, and Assistant Zell.

But, the System, above all, filled Jade with fascination. “The room was as big as a theater?”

“And the Director said there’s a bunch of them around the World but the one I saw is the main one.”

“You think as the girlcomrade of an Agent I could get to see it sometime?” she asked, pulling closer to him on the couch.

Locke shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think it’s off-limits to all subjects not in Govicide.”

“Well, that’s not fair,” she pouted.

“Fair is whatever the Director decides,” Locke answered. “But you’re right, it’s beautiful. All the colors, numbers, charts. Beautiful . . .”

She slapped him on his shoulder. “Now you’re just rubbing it in.”

“Sorry.” He hugged her.

“And what about our . . . problem?” Jade looked down at her stomach.

“Our what?” A sword of regret struck him as soon as he said those words. “I mean—

“Our thing. Our fetus. What did the Director say?” Jade slid away from him.

“Well . . .” Locke fished for the right OWG words to explain what happened but they darted away like cockroaches in the daylight. Even so, he knew the right words didn’t exist. He convinced Jade before he left he would resolve their situation in the District. But with what transpired in his interview, a resolution became impossible.

Her question caught him off-guard because by the time Locke sat on the couch, he already had begun to look at the fetus problem as just another case to solve. Gather evidence. Look at the facts. Find the hole in the story and exploit it. No fear, just procedure.

In their case, the task would be finding the hole in the System and exploiting it. Unfortunate for him, three hours ago he just saw the System and there were no obvious holes, just like the OWG planned and professed.

Hamilton found them, so why couldn’t he do it, too?

One thing at time, Locke reeled in his thoughts. First objective: Make sure Jade doesn’t freak out and take any rash actions.

“What? Don’t tell me you didn’t ask him!” She jumped off the couch, stomping toward the eating room and throwing her arms in the air. She spun around and came right back at him, stopping at his feet.

He leaned forward. “I was going to but--”

“But what? You were telling me all about the paintings, the monuments, and Govicide Headquarters. I thought you handled it.” Jade’s voice rattled the window right behind him.

Locke hoped the fascination of the trip would soften the blow once Jade found out the bad news.

No such luck.

“Things didn’t go as planned.”

“You . . . don’t . . . say.” Sarcasm dripped from her lips like water torture.

“Well, what I left out about the interview was he told me I was a decoy so none of the Agents looked stupid when they interrogated Hamilton. So it wasn’t a favor or even a courtesy. After I heard that, I knew my plan wasn’t going to work.” He grabbed her dangling right hand.

She jerked her hand away. “A decoy?”

“It gets worse.”

“How’s that possible?” She folded her arms, staring down at him. He felt like a rat in a corner.

Locke rolled his head back and forward, loosening his neck. He suspected Jade would love to strangle it right then. “The Director knows you got those pregnancy tests.”

“How does he know?” Her hands went to her hips. She leaned over just by a few degrees.

“The System tracks everything. You know that. Just be happy they’re not aware you used them already and what the results were.”

Jade looked to the ceiling. Then her right hand came to her face.

Her body relaxed after a few moments like the fight left her.

“What are you thinking?” Locke asked, hoping the answer wouldn’t make him feel any worse than he already did. He’d let her down, but he couldn’t see how he could have changed the outcome of the interview.

“I’m thinking I don’t know what we’re gonna do. If I have this fetus, they’ll know. If I get an abortion, they’ll know.” Her legs collapsed, dropping her onto the couch.

He moved next to her and she buried her head in his neck. The dam in her eyes broke and the tears flowed.

His mind ticked off all the points leading to their current predicament. Hamilton murdering the first Agent in Gambling City. Locke being allowed to follow the leads all over the World as the other murders occurred. Jade and he having non-sex credit sex just at the right, or wrong, time. Hamilton getting caught. Stallings requesting Locke become a Govicide Agent.

A unique formula adding up to the two of them standing at the precipice of the rest of their lives.

The die was cast, though. There was no reverse switch. The only choice Locke had left was to follow his detective instincts. He had to put his emotions aside. Emotions could not save him and Jade.

Only thinking could protect them now.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” he whispered in her ear. “You won’t show for what . . . two more months? It’ll give me time to figure this out. I’m being partnered with a Govicide veteran. He might give me some info on a way out.”

“He’s going right to Director Stallings when you bring it up. You know it . . . you know it!” Her voice crescendoed to a wail, her lips moving against his neck.

He stroked her hair. "I'm not going to be stupid, honey. I'll feel him out. Plus, I'll get to know the System even better. Maybe there's a way around it where you can get an abortion but still go by the mandate."

"You think so?" Her voice softened.

"But we have to be smart about this. Don't get anything having to do with being pregnant. Or they'll know."

She looked up at him. "I'll do my best."

He stared into her glowing brown eyes. "I'll start with Govicide. I'll do great work. Everything will be fine. Yes, it's not the best circumstances right now but it will work out." He smiled, but waves of doubt splashed behind it.

The limousine driver was true to his word. Locke called him at 6:45am and the same driver as yesterday appeared on the doorstep at 7:10am.

Locke tried to make conversation with him but the male didn't seem in the mood. The topics: driving, the OWG, Govicide. Nothing made a dent. The driver kept his eyes on the street, once in a while checking the rearview mirror.

They arrived at the Homicide Department in no time. Locke laughed at himself for not realizing a car ride took less time to get to the Department than his bus route. In the limousine, he arrived an entire hour earlier, 7:30am.

The limousine pulled in front of the building. The driver informed him he would wait for Locke, all day if needed. Locke didn't know what to say so he kept it simple.

"Thanks."

Inside, the receptionist sat at her post. Locke hadn't seen her two days ago.

"Detective Locke, I did not realize you were back . . . and you are early." She glanced the clock behind him.

"I kind of miscalculated how long it would take the limousine to get me here," he laughed.

"Limousine?" She cocked her head.

"I got promoted yesterday in the District by Director Stallings. I'm a Govicide Agent now." He fumbled for his badge and pulled it out. "See?"

The receptionist's face turned red and her left hand fluttered at her neckline. Something about her reaction reminded Locke of Megan, the flight attendant.

"Oh my, Govicide Agent Locke, I had no idea." She pushed her chair away, stood up and bowed, keeping her eyes on him.

"It's okay. Don't worry about it."

She didn't sit back down. "How is your girlcomrade? Are you still with her?" she asked, playing with a pen in her right hand.

The receptionist was not unattractive. But like the flight attendant, she was off-limits.

"I am. Thanks for asking. Well, nice seeing you again."

Fearing she might jump him if he stayed a second longer, he hurried down the hallway.

The detectives would arrive within the next hour. Homicide was nine-to-five work unless, of course, the victims were Govicide Agents.

Locke found a box in a janitor's closet to hold his articles and mementos. After filling out the proper paperwork so he could use the discarded box without any problems,

he placed it on his desk and began to fill it. He opened the top right drawer of his desk, finding a stack of letters written to him by victims' families. He removed one from its envelope.

Detective Locke, I thank you for finding the murderer of our daughter, Jennifer. I miss her but I also realize that through her death more Goods and Services will be available to other subjects. That is how the OWG works, right? Jennifer was an energetic believer in the OWG, as we all are. She understood that we are all just the Masses who work for its existence. There is no after-life. And that is too bad because I am sure if there were, Jennifer would want to work for the ends of the OWG there as well.

Thank you.

Ms. Emma Braun

He read the letter twice. The Jennifer Braun case had been his second case but he couldn't remember the details. Sometimes a smell, an image, or a feeling came upon him when he remembered a particular murder from his twelve years of work. But Jennifer's case blended in with all the others.

Similar letters lived in his drawer. Each letter possessed the same tone, a thanks with the understanding the OWG was better off with the victim dead.

He took them all and placed them in the box.

The next drawer down held his Commendations. Each framed. Signs of accomplishment inside Homicide, they meant nothing outside its walls, like being the best of the worst.

The "Efficient Homicide Investigation" Commendation. The "Torture of a Suspect" Commendation. And the one that made him the most proud, "Homicide Analysis of the Year" Commendation.

He received this last one right before Hamilton's spree started. Locke showed how the investigation of a five-year old girl's murder by her parents cost the OWG more credits than if the girl had lived to her natural death. In the OWG this year, the life expectancy for a female was 61.8 years old. A male: 59.7.

From his study, the OWG altered their criteria for investigating murders. Now, Homicide completed a cost-benefit analysis before any investigation. If it determined an investigation potentially cost more than if the dead subject had lived their entire natural life, Homicide put no detectives on the case.

Instead, the OWG gave the victim's family one credit less than what the victim would have cost over the course of their natural-born life. The OWG allowed the murderer to roam free since he had done the OWG a favor, saving it at least one credit. This freed up time at Homicide and made the OWG more efficient with its credits. The families didn't like it, but they saw how good the change in criteria was for the OWG. And the credits went a long way. Plus, all sorrow eventually disappeared in time.

Locke piled the commendations into the box. He opened the left drawer where he kept all his notes from prior investigations, including Hamilton's. He didn't take time to read them but several words stood out: strangled, drowned, burned, suffocated, bled to death, run over. Just a few of the ways Hamilton killed those Govicide Agents.

Each death reminded him of their locations all over the World. Gambling City, Dale City, Putneyville, Mountain Town, Red Star City, Francoville.

Locke shook his head, still not understanding how Hamilton managed to evade them for so long. And no way Hamilton used just trains and boats to get to those places. Not as quickly as Hamilton seemed to travel.

A jet? An SST? Not possible.

Perusing the list, Locke realized how lucky he had gotten. Or was it unlucky due to Jade's pregnancy? If the first murder had occurred in any one of these other cities, Locke wouldn't have even heard about the investigation except through the OWG News. And how many other cities were there in the world? He estimated the odds of Hamilton committing his first murder in Gambling City were one in, at least, a thousand. That was lucky.

Or not.

Continuing to fill up the box, Locke remembered how the Govicide Agents didn't want him on the Hamilton investigation at first. They thought they could handle it themselves. But, none of them had experience with analyzing blood spatter evidence. They were clueless about protecting a murder scene. None of them knew how to interrogate a murder witness.

They interrogated economic witnesses and suspects, but that was totally different. In those cases, they didn't start their questioning until they scanned the barcodes and downloaded the System data. Govicide Agents always had the hammer of the computer printouts to pound away at an Offender. And the System information could make Offenders confess in minutes.

But in Homicide, anything learned at a crime scene came from human analysis, not a machine. Homicide showed up with brains, not equipment. No scanners. No System information. No charts. No graphs. Locke taught the Govicide Agents the art of interrogating witnesses when no prior information was available.

The Agents resisted, at first. But soon they relented and saw the advantage of an actual Homicide Detective on the case. Plus, both departments got something in the process. Locke learned about DNA and fingerprinting, techniques unfamiliar to Homicide due to cost. The Govicide Agents learned to interrogate witnesses without the help of data, adding to their already-polished techniques.

Finishing his packing, he sat down at his empty desk. Alone. No other detectives had arrived. This would be his last time here.

Swiveling his chair, he came to rest pointed at the doors leading to the prison. A realization came to him: Hamilton was still here, on the premises, only two hundred yards away.

What was the murderer doing right now? Worrying about his impending execution? Wondering why no Agents had been to see him yet? Sleeping?

Locke tapped his foot on the floor.

He should go see the killer.

No, that was un-mandated. And Locke had enough potential trouble as it was.

While he sat ruminating, he was surprised to find his legs pushing the wheeled chair closer to the doors, as if they had a will of their own—or was it his inner curiosity controlling them? Half inch by half inch. Inch by inch. Until he had moved almost three feet.

It couldn't hurt, right?

He owed Hamilton everything, even if he had killed fourteen Agents. Without those murders, he would still be nothing but a Homicide Detective. Now, Locke had a chance to serve the OWG in his fullest capacity as an Agent, even if in the end his and Jade's transgressions were uncovered.

The food, the SST's, the limousines, the equipment. It was all thanks to Hamilton.

Couldn't he be allowed just a moment to see the killer?

How could they begrudge him a moment of reflection?

CHAPTER 9

The journey to the Homicide Prison on an average day took five minutes. Locke did it in three. It took him down a hallway still under construction since before Hamilton murdered the first Agent. Due to be finished years ago, Locke heard Offenders had caused the completion date to be pushed back several times.

Most of the ceiling panels were out, exposing electrical conduits and water pipes. Fluorescent lights did their best to light his way, but half were missing. A straight shot, two sets of fire doors were the only barriers between the offices and the prison area.

He had no intentions of talking to Hamilton. He just wanted to see the murderer one last time. Over and over he recited to himself. Do not talk to him. Do not provoke him. Do not engage him in any way.

Closing the last set of doors, Locke saw Ned, the Prison Guard on duty. They knew each other, though they hadn't seen each other in two years.

Tall and lanky, blond and in his mid-twenties, Ned read his OWG Monthly behind a counter.

"Hey, Ned," Locke said to him, waving.

The younger male hadn't heard him approach and almost fell off his stool.

"Detective Locke?" Ned squinted. "Hey, where have you been? I have not seen you in forever."

Locke leaned against the counter. "Been working on this." He whipped out his Govicide Badge.

"Is that? No . . ." Ned came from behind the counter to get a closer look. "That is a--"

"A Govicide Badge. Got it yesterday. Director Stallings gave it to me."

The Guard's eyes rotated back and forth from Locke's face to the badge. "You are kidding me. That is not supposed to be possible. Going from a Detective . . ." His voice trailed off.

"To an Agent? But here I am. That's the OWG truth."

Ned's eyes narrowed then he snapped his fingers. "The Hamilton case. He is still in the cell here. Catching him is what did it, right?"

"Yep," Locke nodded, putting his badge away.

"I guess I should bow." The Guard retreated two steps and lowered his head.

Locke grabbed the younger male's shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?" Ned asked, freezing his motion.

"We've known each other a while, Ned. Don't bother."

Ned stepped back up on to his stool. "Congratulations to you, Govicide Agent Locke."

"Ned, please. Just call me what you've always called me." Locke knew the mandates but he saw no need for a subject he knew for so long to call him by the official title.

"Okay. Locke it is," Ned answered, looking like he finally believed Locke wasn't testing him. "How do you like it so far?"

“So far so good.” Locke took a peek down the prison corridor. “So, Hamilton’s still here.”

Ned peered down in Hamilton’s direction as well. “You heard correctly. I am surprised by it but hey, that is a decision way above my work assignment.”

“I’d like to see him.” Locke took three side steps, putting one hand on the prison door.

Ned lowered his voice. “You know that is un-mandated.”

“Did you forget already?” Locke pulled out his badge again.

Seeing the badge, Ned leaned back. “The Director said absolutely no Govicide Agents are allowed to go near him.”

“Ned, I’m not even going to talk to him. I spent two years trying to catch him. I want to get one last look at him so I can close this chapter of my life.”

“I . . .” The Guard’s indecisive eyes shifted to the corridor.

“Look at this.” Locke pointed at his badge. “It would be nice to have this on your side, wouldn’t it? In case you broke a mandate.”

The badge drew Ned in, his attention fixated on it then on Locke. “I see you are already getting used to your new-found power.”

“I’m self-taught.”

“Okay, Govicide A-, I mean, Locke. But I will go with you.” The young Prison Guard slid off his stool.

“I don’t think so. Give me the keys.”

The Security Guard held no advantage in the matter. He could not oppose a Govicide Agent. Ned reached under his counter, grabbed the keys and handed them to Locke.

“Thanks, Ned.” He unlocked the two doors separating the Guard area from the cells.

All of the murderers housed here possessed no more than a couple of kills. This made Hamilton’s such an interesting case. Not only did he manage to kill Govicide Agents but killed so many. He took on the best, bravest, and brightest the OWG offered and murdered them one by one.

Every prisoner eyed Locke as he passed, their attention shifting from the OWG Manuals provided to them. They were dressed in red jump suits, as was the mandate for murderers. None of them would wear the jumpsuit for long, though. Once the OWG believed the victim’s family recovered from their loss, these prisoners would be let out to go about their OWG work once again. The maximum sentence was under five years. No need to use up more credits than was necessary to house them.

Except for Hamilton, of course. He would never leave Homicide or Govicide custody alive.

The cell bloc reminded Locke of a Gambling City alleyway. Dark with just a hint of an echo for anyone who walked through it.

He passed the seventh of the ten cells. A voice, quiet but distinct, joined the tapping of his footsteps. For an instant, he thought Ned followed him into the bloc. Slowing down, Locke peeked over his shoulder but no one trailed him.

At half his previous pace, he continued. The voice got louder.

The eighth cell was empty.

He reduced his tempo further, reaching the ninth cell. The prisoner in it appeared asleep.

Locke, almost to the point of standing still, stopped for a moment between each step. The voice hovered right at talking volume. But the speech pattern didn't resemble that of a subject talking to anyone. It sounded more like a subject talking to himself. No pauses. No inflection of the voice. Just a steady stream of words.

And only one cell remained.

Hamilton's.

Locke tiptoed up to the final cell, keeping himself out of Hamilton's sight. Leaning forward, he peered inside. The cot didn't look slept in. The white pillow fluffed with no wrinkles. Blanket and sheet tucked in under the mattress.

Hamilton sat on a chair in the middle of the room, still clothed in his black Govicide jumpsuit, facing the rear of the tiny room. His back arched straight, hands in his lap, and feet flat on the floor. Knees and elbows bent in right angles, it seemed like an uncomfortable sitting position.

Locke had experience listening. In fact, listening was the thing Homicide Detectives did more than anything else. Listening to other detectives. Listening to witnesses. Listening to suspects. Listening to experts.

And he listened now. What he heard was not what he expected.

“ . . . To properly understand political power and trace its origins, we must consider the state that all people are in naturally.”

The language was OWG and these were words Locke heard before, but their combination was unfamiliar.

“That is a state of perfect freedom of acting and disposing of their own possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature.”

Locke jerked back. Law? Persons? People? All words un-mandated by the OWG. Freedom, a word similar to free, as in Free Enterprisers, but what did the “dom” mean when added to it? Probably nothing good.

The utterance of those words under any circumstances meant automatic prison time and credit deductions for a subject or Agent. Subjects were known to turn each other in if they heard those words spouted.

Yet, Locke never entertained the thought. No thought of calling out to Hamilton for him to stop saying those words. No desire to yell at Hamilton for ignoring mandates. No need to protect the OWG language from such un-mandated, ugly words.

Not even a thirst to call in other Agents so they could all torture Hamilton for his language transgressions.

But, the reason he refrained wasn't because it would reveal Locke came to see Hamilton against the Director's mandate.

He remained standing there because he decided his curiosity was more important. His curiosity demanded he stand there and hear every word out of Hamilton's mouth, no matter if the words were unmandated or not. Hamilton needed to be heard. The OWG would have to wait.

Locke's spine rippled, the nerves inside it trying to reject the unmandated thought coming from his mind. His stomach reacted by spewing acid into his throat. His legs tried to shuffle him back away from the cell but his feet would not obey.

Instead, against everything Locke learned in the OWG, he leaned forward, exposing the top half of his body.

With one quick spin, Hamilton might see him. But not an ounce of worry weighed Locke down. The prospect mattered little compared to his interest in every one of Hamilton's words.

The words had to mean something, more than just their OWG definitions. They were a key to understanding this killer. They could unlock what made Hamilton tick.

"People in this state do not have to ask permission to act or depend on the will of others to arrange matters on their behalf. The natural state is also one of equality in which all power and jurisdiction is reciprocal and no one has more than another."

Hamilton said out the words without hesitation. It sounded as though Hamilton was reading from a book. But the prisoner held nothing in his hands, nothing written on the wall he faced.

"It is evident that all human beings-- as creatures belonging to the same species and rank and born indiscriminately with all the same natural advantages and faculties-- are equal amongst themselves."

Under normal conditions and with no script, if a subject was just talking off the top of his head, he would stumble, change his words, go off on tangents unrelated to the topic, and not speak in a logical way. There would be "uh's" and "um's" and "you know's" and "like's."

But Hamilton spoke as if reciting from a teleprompter, like the OWG Media Reporter did every night. Full sentences. Nouns and verbs together.

It occurred to Locke: Those words were not coming off the top of Hamilton's head. They were written down somewhere. And he had memorized them. There was no other answer.

"They have no relationship of subordination or subjection unless God, the lord and master of them all, had clearly set one person above another and conferred on him an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty."

God? He'd never heard the word.

Master? The OWG was the only master.

No one has more power than another? No OWG document or book would dare say that. The Exalted Ruler possessed all the power. The Govicide Director had all the power. The OWG had all the power.

Hamilton's words, treasonous or not, lured Locke. He lifted his foot to step closer, but a sound stopped him. An uneven click, click, click, on the cell bloc floor. He eased himself back around the corner. The killer continued his recitation.

Locke turned to see an older male, short in stature and wide in girth, approaching him. A comb-over did its best to disguise his bare, reddish scalp. Yet, a goatee dangled from the male's chin. The two didn't seem to go together.

The male's stride was uneven due to a limp. Click, click . . . click, click . . . click, click.

But this stranger's black suit was impeccable, shiny and creased, rivaling the Director's. His tie and shirt, also black, matched black shoes.

A Govicide Agent?

Couldn't be.

From forty feet away, Locke pinned his eyes on the approaching male's puffy face. It looked scrunched, causing even more wrinkles around his eyes.

Putting a few feet between himself and Hamilton's cell, Locke approached the male.

Who was he? Only Govicide was mandated to wear black. Locke thought he'd better have a pretty good story why he was outside Hamilton's cell or this would be the shortest stint as an Agent ever.

"Can I help you?" Locke spoke in the softest voice possible.

"Are you Govicide Agent Michael Locke?" The stranger answered about a hundred decibels higher.

They stood a few feet from each other.

"Yes, yes I am." Locke had one ear on this conversation and the other on Hamilton.

"Govicide Agent Locke, I am Govicide Agent Alex Hiss. You are my new partner." He put out his right arm and Locke shook it.

"My new partner?" Locke answered, hoping his right hand didn't reveal the stress rising within him. "I didn't—"

"Why are you so close to Hamilton's cell?" Hiss didn't let go of Locke's hand. Instead, he squeezed, not enough to hurt but enough to make his next point sink in. "Do you not know that the Director has mandated no Govicide Agents are supposed to be anywhere near Hamilton?"

What to say? What to say? What to say?

What lie would work?

Locke wrenched his dry mouth open. "Yes, I know, I know. Well . . ." As he replied, Locke couldn't keep his eyes from going to Hiss' grip. "You know, when I'm inside these walls, I still feel like a detective. You know what I mean? I was one for twelve years. You've been a distinguished--" Locke accented it not knowing if it was true or not. A little flattery couldn't hurt at this crucial moment, "--Agent your whole working life. You know what I mean. We're in uncharted territory here with me becoming an Agent, right? And I'm telling you, it takes a while to change your mindset. I mean, look at me. I'm standing here reliving Hamilton's case." Locke yanked his hand away and wiped it on his pants.

Hiss eyed Locke, a unmanicured eyebrow raised almost meeting a forehead wrinkle.

Locke shifted from one foot to the other, his teeth forming a grin but it was as shallow as a child's pool. He wiped the other hand on his pants, sweat pouring off it like a waterfall. Hiss needed to believe him or this was the end.

"You are correct. I am a distinguished Agent," Hiss responded. "How did you know?"

"I just figured because the Director told me you were on a project. He made it sound like it was special. They'd only give a case like that to someone who knows what's going on." His face hurt from faking the smile so long. But, if it meant getting out of this, Locke could fake it for hours.

At once, Hiss' demeanor changed, the eyebrow descended and a few wrinkles disappeared. Locke noted it happened when he mentioned the Director.

"So, he told you about this case I am working?" Hiss asked, his chest thrusting out.

"Nothing specific. I just got a feeling he thought you were doing good work." Locke kept his facial expressions glued in place. When in doubt, keep buttering, Locke told himself.

"Is that right?" Hiss smiled, exposing a missing bottom tooth.

"Uh-huh. He also told me I could learn a lot from you." Locke kept piling it on. "Since I was merely a detective."

“Yes, I think you will learn a lot from me,” Hiss nodded.

On the outside, Locke retained his demeanor. Inside, though, he let the good feelings flow. With that sentence, Hiss was already planning how he could help Locke become the perfect Agent. A very good sign.

So, not even a seasoned Agent could resist the power of adulation? Locke stashed the information in his mental backpocket for future reference.

“Well, then, the first thing you can learn from me is to never ignore a Director’s mandate again. I will let you slide because I understand you are still a detective up here.” Hiss pointed to his head. “Did you talk to Hamilton?”

Locke laughed, “Talk to him? Of course not. I was just listening. He didn’t even see me. He was reciting something in there. I’m not sure what it is but it kind of caught my interest.”

“He was talking to himself?” Hiss looked over Locke’s shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“I am sure it was nothing important. He killed my partner. But you already knew that.”

Not waiting for a response, Hiss walked back toward the Guard’s station. Locke stood there watching him. If Hiss had only been a few minutes later. Locke had been so close to getting to know Hamilton better. Now, that wouldn’t happen.

Yet, as much as Locke attempted to be angry about not hearing more of Hamilton’s words, the happiness of escaping the sticky situation eclipsed it. He’d dodged a big problem. If he and Jade could dodge the pregnancy problem as well, they would be out of danger forever.

He fixated on the cell one more time. He listened for a few seconds but couldn’t hear Hamilton. Maybe the murderer was done talking to himself for the day.

With a deep sigh, Locke followed Hiss, catching up to him at the first door.

“How did you know I was down there?” Locke asked, unlocking the door for Hiss.

“The Security Guard told me. He had an extra set of keys and unlocked the doors for me.”

A new source of stress rose in Locke. Ned might be in trouble for letting him into the prison. “You know, Ned tried to remind me of the Director’s mandate.”

“Yeah, me too,” Hiss smirked. “Like some Guard can keep us doing from what we want.”

“Right.” Locke responded, happy Ned would avoid any repercussions.

Once they were through, Locke tossed the keys back to Ned. “Thanks, Ned.”

“No problem, Locke.”

Hiss stopped in his tracks. “Security Guard, how dare you call this Govicide Agent by only his last name? And bow to him while you are at it.” Pointing at him, Hiss shouted as if Ned was a hundred feet away. “He has earned his title and you are to refer to him as such.”

Locke had never seen the Guard move so fast. Ned slid from behind the counter and bowed before Locke had time to blink.

“I am . . . sorry . . . Govicide Agent Locke.” Ned stuttered, facing the ground.

“And?” This word was even louder. Hamilton could probably hear it from his cell.

“Thank you for returning the keys, Govicide Agent Locke.”

“Good. Do not let it happen again, subject.” Hiss headed out of the prison wing.

Ned rose from his bow. Locke shrugged his shoulders. Embarrassed, Locke patted Ned on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it, Ned,” Locke whispered. “You’re doing good work for the OWG.”

The Guard nodded but his face looked like he’d just lost a month’s worth of credits.

Locke disliked what happened, and although he’d joked with Ned a few minutes before about bowing, the new Govicide Agent realized Hiss was correct. Mandates were mandates.

. . . unless an old Govicide Agent liked being flattered by a new Govicide Agent, of course. Then, the mandates could be bent. Seemingly.

Locke caught up to Hiss. “Was that really called for back there?”

“What do you mean?” Hiss sounded a bit surprised.

“Ned’s a good subject. He didn’t need to be treated like that. He knows how he’s supposed to treat Govicide Agents. We used to work together. He still kind of sees me as a Detective. That’s how we talk.”

“Govicide Agent Locke, you have a lot to learn. Without us, he would have nothing. And that deserves respect. Not to mention it is in the OWG Manual. Chapter one, section two. The proper way to treat a Govicide Agent. Have you read it?” His tone sounded more like a parent than a partner.

“Yes, I have.”

“You are aware treating a Govicide Agent improperly is punishable by deductions of credits and prison time?”

The two moved at a brisk pace due to Hiss’ strides. They sailed through one set of double doors like they were swinging gates.

“I’m aware of that.”

“Then, he got off easy.”

“Alex, I don’t--”

Hiss stopped so abruptly, his shiny shoes squeaked on the tiled floor. “Now, there you go. How did I refer to you when we first met?”

Locke stopped a few feet ahead. “You called me Govicide Agent Michael Locke.”

“Precisely. I did not call you Michael. I did not call you Locke. I did not call you Homicide Detective Locke.” Hiss counted the different labels off on his left hand. “No, even though you have not been an Agent for twenty-four hours yet, I referred to you by the proper title because the Manual mandates it. Is that not what it says?”

“Yes, that’s what it says.”

“Then, that is how you will refer to me. Govicide Agent Hiss is my position. I have earned it.”

Hiss had only passed a test, while Locke followed a killer around the world for two years. Locke wanted to ask: Who earned what exactly?

He couldn’t say it, of course. If any thought or statement was un-mandated in the OWG, it was that one.

“Of course, Govicide Agent Hiss, you have earned it. I apologize.”

Locke got the idea Hiss was intimidated by him in some way. The handshake, the tone, the treatment of Ned. It was less about proper procedure but more about Hiss getting the upper hand. Looking back, Locke now understood why flattering Hiss worked so well. It fed right into Hiss’ mental makeup. He needed to berate others to feel superior.

Which meant he felt inferior when no one was around.

“Good.” Hiss dipped his head then raised it again, drawing in a huge breath, his body swelling. “I see all the Masses taking shortcuts when it comes to Govicide. We are out here working for the OWG, and the Masses try to call us by our first names.” Hiss shook his head. “I waited around at your desk for a few minutes. One of the Detectives came in with a bag of OWG Donuts. He asked two other Detectives if they wanted one. I pointed out to him he would have to file the proper paperwork to share them. I reminded all three of them of the penalties for sharing. The Detective told the others he decided to eat them himself and to nevermind. I entered them all into the System anyway. Their deductions start immediately. He actually believed those OWG Donuts were his. They were made by OWG workers. An OWG worker delivered them. How could he think he could do whatever he wanted with them?”

Locke was not around for the last two years but he knew they sometimes broke the mandates. It was a by-product of being viewed as unimportant in the OWG.

Hiss continued, “He thinks those credits used to get those OWG Donuts were his. They are not. It has never been that way and never will. Just because credits go into your account, or my account, or that Detective’s account, does not mean anything. Those credits are just a way to show appreciation for our work for the OWG. It is not because we earned them. We are supposed to work for the OWG anyway. And whatever we get we should be happy with, even if those credits only stay in our account for a month and then get taken back.”

“You’re right, Govicide Agent Hiss,” Locke agreed. If subjects started to think they deserved credits for their work, the OWG would fall apart and then nobody would get anything. Then, everyone would die.

“Who does that Detective think he is? A Free Enterpriser? Pretty soon he is going to expect those other detectives to give him a couple credits for each donut. Then what?”

“Shortcuts are being taken, Govicide Agent Hiss.” Locke nodded. “No doubt about it.”

“And that is why we are here.” The old Agent pointed to himself with his thumb against his barrel chest. Any harder and it would have penetrated. “To stop the Masses, even ourselves, from getting around the OWG. Never forget that.”

With each passing second, Locke felt his partner would be no help in getting him out of the pregnancy problem. But, no sense of panic combusted in him. Locke would be patient and search for the perfect moment to spring it on Hiss.

Of more immediate importance, Locke believed if he didn’t do something soon Hiss would go on all day about how the Masses didn’t give the OWG enough respect. “What’s this project you’re on?”

The old Agent smiled again. This time when Locke saw the missing tooth he thought of Hamilton’s perfect teeth.

Hamilton. Again.

Hiss brushed by Locke, almost knocking him over. “My automobile is out front. I want to show you something.”

CHAPTER 10

Locke hefted his box, glanced around the office one last time, and met Hiss in front of Homicide. His black automobile was smaller than a limo but it was just as luxurious, having a small three-pointed star on the hood and trunk. Locke let his eyes run over it for a few seconds before opening the door and putting his box on the seat.

“I have been working on this case for almost two years, not long after my partner got killed. I get reassigned once in a while to other cases but the Director keeps allowing me to come back to this one. You are going to see very quickly why he paired us together.” Hiss made a left on Sand Way.

“Where are we going?” Locke asked, noting Hiss’ driving wasn’t as good as the limo driver’s. The automobile swerved between lanes, almost hitting the curb twice.

“There is a warehouse down here I want to show you. I think it is a good way to explain what is going on.”

Making a left on Allen Street, Hiss stopped the automobile in front of a building. Locke knew this area of Gambling City but hadn’t passed through it in many years.

The warehouse, by its appearance, had been built early in the OWG’s existence. In fact, as Locke noticed other buildings on the street, they all seemed around fifty years old. Doors missing, broken windows, weeds seeping through the sidewalks in front, Locke guessed the OWG had moved all the workers from these buildings to new ones once others were built.

Some day, the OWG would refurbish these so even more Goods and Services could be given to the Masses.

Hiss spoke again when they stood in the empty doorway of the building, “A few months before Hamilton killed my partner, we traced cash to Gambling City. See, we all know there are Offenders out there trying to get around the System. You know how cash works?” Hiss rested his body against the doorway.

“The generalities. It’s un-mandated because it can’t be tracked by the System. And if you can’t put something into a computer, those Offenders can make un-mandated transactions behind the OWG’s back,” Locke answered.

“Close enough.” Hiss noticed dirt on his sleeve and brushed it off. “And some of them succeed. Not for long, luckily. But sometimes we find locations where these Offenders hold their cash. But instead of burning it like we used to do, we mark a few bills with World Positioning System devices and leave the cash there. That is how we catch them. Follow me.” Hiss stepped through the doorway into the broken-down warehouse.

The building was 150 feet deep and about 75 feet wide. Holes in the roof allowed rain to come in but any kind of precipitation in Gambling City was rare. But those same holes permitted columns of light to brighten the interior. Dust and dirt covered the concrete-slab floor. Bits of paper, having blown in through all the small openings, swirled in whirlwinds towards the rear. Walls made of rusted steel rose to the rafters.

And it all smelled like a murder scene. Locke guessed a few dead animals were on the premises.

Hiss led him to the middle of the warehouse floor.

“Eventually these Offenders get wise, find the WPS devices, and destroy them but it does give us some insight. Anyway, over two years ago the patterns changed. Cash going North to South started going East to West. Cash being used only on the First Continent started going over the oceans to the other continents. And places like this were being filled up.”

“This warehouse used to be a holding place for cash?” Locke asked, doing a three-sixty to scan every wall.

“Correct. We traced the cash to this location. We entered this building and the cash was stacked in bundles eight feet high from one side to the other.”

“Eight feet?” Locke whistled.

“Yes. And now, it is all gone. Taken out of here under the cover of darkness right around the time Hamilton murdered my partner.”

Locke winced remembering how Hamilton killed Agent Cardon. Then, he caught on to what Hiss just said. “Wait a minute. It would take--”

“It would take more than a few Offenders and one huge, un-mandated vehicle. Yes, I know that, Govicide Agent Locke,” Hiss answered sounding perturbed.

“So, you’re saying—“

“Every location where Hamilton murdered an Agent, there were warehouses like this one. In Gambling City’s case, the cash was here. Hamilton killed my partner. I came back here a week later and the cash was gone. And now all of those warehouses are empty. I had my spies check. All empty. Gone. Disappeared. Hamilton killed an Agent in a city and the cash in that city disappeared about the same time.”

This was complete news to Locke. He thought he knew everything there was to know about all of Hamilton’s murders. Never did he suspect they connected to something else. He heard not one hint of it during his two years on the case.

A hint of anger scraped Locke’s emotions. He should have been told way back then. He might have been able to stop Hamilton before he got to number fourteen.

“Why didn’t I ever hear about this? None of the other Agents mentioned it.” Locke’s toes curled in his brown shoes.

“Govicide Agent Locke, you are only the third subject in the entire OWG to know about it. The Director knows, I know, and now you know. None of those Agents working with you knew.” Hiss wandered toward the rear of the warehouse. “We could not take the chance it would leak and allow Hamilton to know we knew the murders he was committing were connected to cashflow.”

Locke turned to the doorway. “Well, he’s locked up now. Let’s go find out what he knows.”

“We cannot do that, Govicide Agent Locke,” Hiss yelled, the words bouncing off all four walls.

“Why not?” Locke asked, stopping. He forgot all about--

“Well, first of all, the Director has made it very clear that Hamilton is off-limits to all Govicide Agents. And--“

Oh, that. “Even if Hamilton has the answers to this case?” Locke felt his head lean to one side.

“Yes, if the Director mandates it, then his orders cannot be breached,” Hiss answered back.

Locke heard something in the old Agent's voice. He couldn't put a finger on it, though.

"But he's in prison." Locke pointed in the general direction of Homicide. "It's not like he can talk to any of his conspirators now."

Step by step, Hiss cut the distance between the two of them. "Govicide Agent Locke, if Hamilton's comrades can make the cash in this warehouse disappear, they can make other things happen, too. Like getting in contact with Hamilton." Hiss stopped less than three feet from Locke.

Locke shook his head so hard he saw stars. "I don't get it. The System tracks everything. It is supposed to be perfect so--"

"It *is* perfect, Govicide Agent Locke," Hiss raised his voice, once again it echoed off the steel panels.

Locke's arms and legs stiffened like iron rods. His chest felt like a pot of hot water. He was so close. One more statement even coming close to suggesting the System might not be perfect and Locke would have ended his work for Govicide.

He threw water on his internal fire, realizing these un-mandated thoughts were becoming more frequent. These were feelings he never experienced in his first thirty years of existence. But, in the last two days, they'd begun to blossom.

He had to put a leash on them.

"Of course, you know what I mean," Locke laughed, looking away. "I'm just saying Hamilton and whoever else have been pretty lucky to evade such a perfect System." The fire inside him died down to a low simmer.

"Yes . . . lucky . . ." The last word from Hiss dropped off a cliff.

Though many emotions flowed through Locke, he still heard something in Hiss' words that made him pause. He wanted to ask Hiss if there was something Hiss was leaving out. But, he dared not.

Locke set those feelings to the side and tried to re-center the discussion. "How are they moving the cash? Why?"

Hiss circled while looking skyward to the rafters, scratching his goatee. "My guess is they got their hands on some old OWG buses. Removed the tracking devices. Made them look like real ones. And hauled the cash out by the busload. As for why, I have not figured that out yet."

"It doesn't seem possible cash could disappear so quickly. Who would accept paper instead of credits?" Locke asked.

"The way it works is they print the cash. It is just really paper cut into smaller pieces with denominations on it. One, two, threes, tens. And it has nothing to do with the System. Say, a donut is one credit. It could be ten units of cash. It makes no sense. Offenders actually accept this stuff. But our concern is that subjects are using it to trade amongst themselves. That is un-mandated. The OWG deserves its credits to be collected because of all it does for us."

Hiss stopped next to one of the high walls. He peered through a hole in it.

"Are you sure these Offenders didn't just move the cash somewhere else? Some other warehouse in town?"

"No. It is definitely in subjects' hands now. We are still working on who has it. But, the cash was headed out of town. The WPS's in the bundles tracked them. The WPS's

batteries died about five hundred miles out of town. They were headed in a northeast direction,” Hiss answered, joining Locke near the doorway.

“Let me guess. That’s where we’re going?”

“Correct. I think the bundles made it the whole way to Dale City, my hometown. We are going there. In fact, the SST leaves in about . . . ”Hiss checked his watch. “. . . two hours.”

“So soon?”

“Is there a problem?” Hiss must have noticed Locke’s facial expression.

“No, no problem. I think my girlcomrade thought I’d be staying around this area.”

“Govicide Agent Locke--” Hiss reverted to his harsh tone from the prison corridor.

“I get it. I get it,” he held up his hands as if to surrender. “I’ll break it to her . . . gently.”

The two Agents headed toward the doorway. “What exactly were you doing earlier when we met?” Hiss asked right before Locke’s foot hit the sidewalk.

“What do you mean?” Locke stopped.

Hiss passed by him and strode into the sunlight. After watching Hiss for a moment, Locke followed.

“In the prison. You were standing there outside Hamilton’s cell. Did you tell me you were listening to him?” Hiss asked.

“I thought you told me you weren’t interested in what Hamilton had to say?” Locke wondered if this was a trick by Hiss. His mind went on full defense so his mouth wouldn’t get him in any more trouble.

“It occurred to me that we may be able to use his words against him.”

Locke debated if he wanted to delve into the topic again. He decided it was safe.

“Yes, I was listening to him,” Locke answered.

“What was he saying?” Hiss rounded to the driver’s side of the automobile but didn’t open his door.

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Locke’s eyes studied the cracked sidewalk, disputing whether he should be truthful. “You’re gonna think I’m crazy.”

“Try me.” The old Agent tapped on the roof above his door, looking up and down the street.

“He was mumbling. No, that’s--”

Hiss laughed. “No surprise there. He murdered our fellow Agents. Conspiracy with other Offenders or not, he would have to be insane to do that. No wonder he is talking to himself.”

“No, no. He was reciting something. Like he’d read something and memorized it. And there in that cell he was getting comfort . . . ” A pain pierced him between his ribs. “. . . by reciting those words.”

Where the idea of “comfort” came from, Locke wasn’t sure. He remembered Hamilton’s voice. Its tone.

Quiet, deliberate, almost with a sense of pride, like Locke heard himself and others read out loud from the OWG Manual.

Locke examined his partner, wondering what he was thinking of this.

“What was he reciting? The OWG Manual? The Ten OWG Commandments?” Hiss examined Locke right back.

“No. I couldn’t hear every word but he was saying something about ‘law of nature’ and ‘God’.”

“I have no idea what any of those words mean. Just one more reason on top of the Director’s mandates you should not go near him again. He is an Offender and an insane killer. His words mean nothing.” Hiss opened his door and sat down in the automobile.

Locke opened his as well but didn’t get in right away. Hamilton was a killer. He was an Offender. But his words definitely meant something.

And, quite to the contrary, Locke was beginning to think Hamilton was quite sane. Just another thought that could get Locke in a lot of trouble.

CHAPTER 11

Jade was not happy.

“I thought you were just going to be working around Gambling City?” She hovered over Locke while he packed.

“I guess I was wrong. I’m sorry. How many times do I have to say it?” This was the fifth “sorry” so far. He glanced at her then continued to pack his new black clothes with great care.

Jacket, ties, shirts, and pants. All silk, a substance made from an insect. Locke found it unbelievable any small creature could manufacture such exquisite fabric. It slid through his fingers like ice. Hiss had brought the clothing, shoes too, with him per instructions from the OWG’s Clothing Czar.

The OWG possessed the clothing sizes for all subjects. Even when a subject gained or lost weight, the OWG clothing designers knew. All they had to do was check the System, which recorded all subjects’ attire order history. One more way the OWG could discover Jade’s pregnancy if she and Locke weren’t careful. One increase in Jade’s size and the System would notice.

She plopped down on the bed beside Locke’s suitcase. “Okay. Sorry. But when are you coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Jade leaned in, trying to get in his line of sight.

“This is Govicide not Homicide.”

He continued to pack. After a few seconds, he noticed Jade didn’t respond.

Locke stopped packing. “What?”

“I was hoping we were going to get to spend more time together.” She knew how to guilt him when she wanted. “After two years of you going all over the place chasing Hamilton, I thought it would be different.”

“It will be. Listen, my new partner, Govicide Agent Hiss. You should see him. You should have heard him go off on Ned today. Anyway,” Locke sat down on the bed beside his distressed girlcomrade. “He told me something only he and the Director know. Could be something big.”

“He yelled at Ned? How could Hiss do that?”

“Govicide Agent Hiss,” he corrected her.

“Of course. Govicide . . . Agent . . . Hiss,” Jade said, accenting every word.

“Don’t be like that,” Locke glared at her. “I know you haven’t run into Agents much in your life but you know how everyone is supposed to refer to them.”

“Hey,” she poked him. “I’ve heard you slip a few times over the years.”

Locke hadn’t told her about him calling Govicide Agent Hiss, “Alex.” Better to just leave that out.

“In any case, I think solving whatever Govicide Agent Hiss is working on might get us out of our problem.” He pointed at her stomach.

She laid her hand on his. “Another plan?” she smirked at him, obviously remembering how Locke’s plan for his interview fell apart. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

“Wait a minute,” he pulled his hand away, “that’s not fair. Listen to me. Trust me when I say this is bigger than Agents dying. Let’s just say it’s the worst Offender behavior I’ve ever heard of. I catch them and I think I can write my ticket in Govicide.”

“Okay, Michael, okay,” she set her head on his shoulder.

“You work two weeks in a row starting tomorrow?” Since graduating from OWG high school, Jade worked as a secretary in the OWG Transportation Department.

“Yeah, don’t remind me. I wish I could find a better way to serve the OWG,” she sighed. “Between all the paperwork dealing with problems where the Fourth and Fifth continents meet--train signals going out, jets losing communication, storms blowing sand onto roads—I think I’m going to go blind. Everything just popped up within the last six months. But it’s gotten worse in the last month.”

“Yeah, you’ve told me,” Locke answered.

Since the beginning, the OWG banned the Masses from that continental area. Something had happened making the area lethal to any kind of life. But, transportation—trains, trucks, and SST’s—still traveled on the edges of it.

Locke thought of Hamilton. Those Pyramids he mentioned bordered the western edge of the region.

“I’ll call you from the road.” Locke stood up but his mind wandered, walking the path of his last thought.

In the limousine, Locke thought back to his first trip to Dale City. It was a year and a half ago. He saw a bit of humor that he’d be retracing his steps, though this time at a much swifter pace. SST’s and limousines always got a subject around quicker than trains and buses.

A year and a half ago, the locals and the Govicide Agents treated him as an afterthought. The Agents only talked to him when they needed him to investigate the blood spatter and determine a cause of death. Otherwise, they avoided him.

The limousine made its first turn in the trip to the airport. Locke noticed one of his old bus stops as he passed by. At the next stop sign, the limo driver looked both ways, even though there wasn’t a vehicle in sight. Locke watched him, wondering what the driver was doing. The car sat for two seconds then accelerated through the intersection.

As the car reached cruising speed, Locke still fixated on Hamilton. That was all it took now. In this case, Jade mentioned problems along those continents and Locke thought of the Pyramids. A reference, a word, a syllable having even a very loose connection to the interrogation and Locke’s mind raced to Hamilton.

Hamilton’s talking came back to Locke. He tried to remember everything, yet all that came were words, not complete sentences. What made it difficult was he recognized each word--it was the official OWG language and Hamilton didn’t speak with any kind of accent. But the words he used didn’t go together.

Closing his eyes, Locke concentrated. He was sure what Hamilton said was a clue. Something if known could help him and Hiss figure out where the cash went and its purpose. His mind grasped at each fragment but it was like grabbing at grains of sand blowing through Gambling City. They slipped through his mind’s fingers.

As much as he pushed himself he couldn’t remember the sentences. A word here, a word there, but nothing more. He slapped his seat.

Opening his eyes, Locke watched the empty living quarters go by. All empty. The OWG built them in preparation for the future when the World would be able to handle more than two billion subjects.

But, how long ago had they been built? He couldn't remember. He recalled seeing these structures years ago but that couldn't be the case. The OWG surely would have populated them by now.

No, they must have been built recently, within the last two years.

The limousine wasn't far from the airport now.

The more he thought about the great future coming, the more Locke's body twitched about the OWG. The OWG had to be protected so this future could come to fruition. Cash couldn't be allowed to flow. Offenders must be stopped. Mandates needed followed.

What were Hamilton and his comrades up to?

Locke pounded the armrest again.

He placed his Agent demeanor to the side and slipped into a detective frame of mind again. The more he thought about the cash the more Locke realized Hiss' analysis was incomplete. This was more than a simple plan to transport cash out of the area, to the Second Continent or wherever. To go to the lengths of murdering fourteen Agents was more than just an effort to transport cash.

No, Locke figured the reason Hamilton killed those Agents was because one Agent could have stopped something else. Something an Agent could ruin on the spot, right at a precise point in time, by himself.

A lone Agent couldn't stop a group of subjects loading cash. A group of Agents could, but not one on his own. Yet, Hamilton only killed one Agent in each area of the World.

An Agent by himself could only stop one subject. Maybe two. What could be so important that an Agent had to die, especially in the ways in which Hamilton killed them?

"Govicide Agent Locke, we are here," the driver informed.

Locke had been in such deep thought he didn't feel the limousine stop at the curb.

Pulling his suitcase through the airport didn't have the same kind of fascination. But once again he wondered why the OWG built a building so big when only a few subjects used it. He still minded having to carry his bags up the stairs of the disconnected escalator and it seemed odd a few subjects would be traveling on an SST that could have fit one hundred.

Hiss already waited in the gate area when Locke arrived, reading the OWG Manual. He didn't look up when Locke sat down beside him.

"Can I ask you a question?" Locke leaned his bags against the chair.

"Yes, Govicide Agent Locke," Hiss answered, not taking his eyes of the book.

"How did all the buildings in the beginning of the OWG get built so fast?" Locke asked not being able to remember the last time he saw a building go from foundation to completion.

"The first Exalted Ruler mandated it and the subjects complied. Everything is possible when the Exalted Ruler mandates something."

"But, why is this airport so big?"

"Because the OWG built it for the future when all subjects will fly."

"When do you think that will be?"

“Soon.” Hiss kept reading.

“How soon?” Locke felt like a little kid who kept asking “why” over and over.

“Soon.”

“What? Five years? Ten years? Twenty?”

“It is not for us to know. The OWG will determine the right day,” Hiss answered.

Locke sucked his lips in not liking Hiss’ answer. Yet, he thought better of continuing the line of questioning. “Of course. The OWG will determine it.”

Hiss nodded, rolling his eyes.

On the SST, Hiss took the very first seat available. Locke was about to take the one behind him when Hiss shook his head, not saying a word. Locke moved toward the back near the same area where he sat on his first flight.

As the jet ascended above the clouds, he watched out the window.

He saw lots of space. But the World was overpopulated.

He saw roads. But the World had very few automobiles.

He saw blue skies. But the World was full of pollution.

And the OWG was perfect. But there were subjects out there disobeying it.

CHAPTER 12

The OWG Flight Attendant woke Locke as the SST descended into Dale City. It touched down like a light bird, just as it had before. It wasn't until Locke was in the airport that he noticed the flight only took an hour. No wonder he felt a little woozy, his sleep was more like a quick nap. The SST's speed surprised him again.

In the limousine, Hiss poured himself a drink from the automobile's bar. The label read, Non-Alcohol Liquid. The OWG banned real alcohol early on because it caused the Masses to forget, as the OWG Exalted Leader put it, "their responsibilities, priorities, and allegiance to the One World Government" when under the influence. Alcohol inebriation, Locke had heard, also caused subjects to run out of sex credits quicker than usual.

Hiss sipped his drink. "This is my town. Where I matured. Where I learned how to follow the OWG. I matriculated to high school not too far from here." He pointed to an area left of the highway. "How much did you get to see when you were here before?"

"Not much really. After riding the train and then the bus, it was all I could do to keep up with the Govicide Agents on the case."

"You see that?" Hiss pointed out the right side of the limousine. "That is the OWG Tower."

"I see it."

The building, tall and black, was constructed of black rectangles stacked on top of each other. Two antennas stuck out the top of it.

Hiss tapped his knuckles on the window then took another sip. "Tallest building on this continent. Built in under a year not long after the OWG formed. Houses regional offices for all of the main departments of the OWG, including Govicide. No Homicide in that building. The building is too important for such a lowly department."

"Yeah, they told me that. The Homicide Department here is an older building near the shore," Locke pointed in the opposite direction of the Tower. "I didn't have enough time to visit it when I was here."

"I can remember going to the shore as a kid for some fishing." Hiss was in full reminiscing mode, his eyes almost shut while remembering. "Filling out the proper paperwork so I could take what I caught home. I could not fill it out so my mother did. The paperwork is a lot longer now."

"That's what I've heard," Locke answered, having never gone fishing. Who had the time?

"But, the summers get hot here. It is not so much hot but humid. I moved out once I passed the Govicide Test." Hiss shook himself as if reliving a Dale City summer.

"Where do you live now?" Locke gazed out his window, empty buildings—big and small—shuffled past.

"All over the place. With this case I do not spend too much time in one spot, I mainly stay at OWG hotels now. Like we will be doing."

Locke knew the hotels well. He'd gotten to stay in a few while chasing Hamilton. The OWG ones for Govicide Agents and Goods and Services workers were several steps above the ones for the Masses. The OWG approved Locke's accommodations in the

Govicide ones so he could be closer to the Agents in case something happened. The Agents made it clear they didn't like the arrangement, treating him like he'd never helped them with any of the investigation.

"Yeah, they're nice," Locke answered, guessing those same Agents couldn't be too pleased about his promotion. He smiled in defiance.

The limousine rolled over the bumpy highway, the cracks in the road jarring the otherwise smooth ride. The OWG Tower got closer and closer until the automobile took an exit, going south parallel to the shoreline. They rode in silence, Locke watching the buildings—some populated, some not, wondering when they were built. Once in a while, he stole a glance at Hiss. It seemed since the OWG Tower went out of sight Hiss gave no attention to their surroundings. The Agent, still sipping his drink like he had all day, stared straight ahead as if admiring the driver.

"So, what's the plan here?" Locke asked once the limousine left the highway.

"Well, I want to interview one of my spies first. But we will have to wait until early evening because he only comes out then."

"What do you think this spy is going to tell us?"

Hiss shifted his position on the seat and poured another drink. "Not sure. He has been good in the past. He is in pretty deep with a couple of Offenders. So, I expect some good information from him."

Deep with Offenders? The words repeated in Locke's head. He couldn't help but ask "Did you ever talk to him about Hamilton?"

Hiss' focus didn't move from its concentration on the front of the limousine. He didn't blink. He didn't shift. Locke moved closer to his side taking Hiss' behavior as a prelude to another rant.

But his worry was for naught.

"I did," Hiss answered with a quick look at Locke, eyes meeting Locke's then shifting away.

"What'd he say?" Locke leaned over, wanting to hear every word.

"I asked about Hamilton before anyone knew his name. My spy could not tell me anything. And he is well-connected."

"Nothing? No information at all."

"No. And if there was any data, my spy here would have found it."

Trying to hide his disappointment, Locke turned away from Hiss. Hamilton managed to be a secret to everyone including a subject who infiltrated groups of Offenders.

More luck for the murderer? Locke didn't think so.

After passing through two more non-working stoplights, their ride ended in front of the OWG Hotel.

Locke remembered it. It happened to be the same one he stayed in when he was tracking down Hamilton. He'd come a long way since then, but the hotel had not. It still looked the same with its neon OWG display out front and its fifty-year old architecture. Off-white plaster cracked in places, forming the façade. Six stories high and sixty feet wide, windows lined up six across.

The previous time, Locke stayed on the fourth floor in a room with a view of the street. He recalled gazing out its window one night, wondering what would cause someone to kill Govicide Agents. An empty construction site laced across the street. It had long been abandoned, the rusting machinery still sat where the OWG Workers left

them. The sign out in front of the construction site said that the project had been abandoned so more credits would be available for Goods and Services.

“They will get our luggage,” Hiss said, interrupting Locke’s thoughts.

In a few seconds, the limousine driver and an OWG Bellboy from the hotel came out with a cart. They loaded the luggage and rolled it inside. Hiss and Locke followed.

Hiss requested a room close to the elevator and ice machine. Locke asked if he could have the same room as a year and a half ago. That room was vacant and Locke received the keys.

The two Agents agreed to meet down in the lobby in an hour.

Locke rode the elevator himself while Hiss stayed in the lobby talking on his phone. He found his room, plopping his luggage down on the bed.

The room had old-style lights that didn’t come on until a switch on the wall was flipped. The mattresses were the box-spring style, no longer manufactured. In fact, Locke was not sure the OWG made any mattresses these days. It had decided subjects could sleep anywhere, even on the floor, so there was no reason to make new mattresses. That left more resources to provide Goods and Services. The sink in the bathroom had handles to turn on the water, unlike newer models that dispensed water when a subject’s hands waved under the faucet.

It felt old. It looked old.

Like the Pyramids.

“Don’t start, Michael,” Locke demanded.

Pulling back the curtain, Locke observed the construction site again. What a contrast: a beautiful Dale City day combined with the ugliness of the area across the street.

An OWG bus passed, then a male on a bike. A male and female strolled on the sidewalk, neither holding hands nor speaking to each other. But, they looked like a couple, dressed in similar clothes.

In the far distance, he saw an SST taking off, without a doubt the one bringing him and Hiss here. It left the surface of the world and penetrated the clouds in less than a minute.

Unpacking, he changed clothes, feeling a little sticky from the limousine ride, his back sweating from the leather seats.

An hour later, Hiss sat beside a table reading the OWG Daily, his eyes and forehead just visible.

“I thought you would be late. But you are on time. Good.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Locke responded, hoping Hiss heard the incredulity in his voice.

Hiss threw the paper on the table and rose from the chair. He didn’t wait for Locke as he rambled to the front door.

The sun was an hour from touching the horizon when the limousine pulled alongside the curb in front of a series of empty buildings.

They were not stand-alone structures. They shared walls and their roofs combined to make one large, flat surface. A subject could walk the entire block on top of them without having to jump from one edifice to the next. Yet, each was its own size. Some were skinny, twenty feet across. Others were fifty feet wide or more, though they were all the

same height. Locke recalled someone referring to this type of structure as an outdoor mall.

Hiss checked his watch. “We are a little early.” He poured himself another drink.

“You really like that stuff?”

“It is better than anything else we have in here.”

“Did you fill out the paperwork to be able to drink that?” Locke thought he might catch Hiss in a mistake.

“Filled it out before we left. None for you since you did not put your name on the forms.” Hiss smiled, sides of his mouth almost touching his ears.

And that missing tooth, Locke noticed it and once again Hamilton’s perfect teeth gleamed in his mind.

Twenty minutes later, almost right on the dot, a group of males appeared at the end of the street. They meandered up until they were almost beside the limousine, talking and laughing like none of them noticed the black machine near them.

Four of them were mixed race. One was pure white. All dressed to the OWG mandate—a variety of different colored shirts with blue pants. No black.

“This is it. Follow my lead.”

Hiss put down his third glass of non-Scotch and opened his door. He made it around the limousine and onto the sidewalk before Locke had a chance to move. He yelled at the group, “Offenders, up against the wall!”

Through his dark window, Locke saw the five stop in their tracks. Fear arrived on their faces.

“What is he doing?” Locke sighed then jumped out of the car. “You heard Govicide Agent Hiss. Up against the wall,” Locke shouted, slamming the car door.

Upon seeing Hiss had help, they backed up. They placed their hands against the wall, legs spread.

“Let me see your papers.” Hiss yelled. They flinched in unison.

Hiss went down the line of the five males. Each of them gave him their OWG ID papers. He pretended to scan the barcode on each document. The males didn’t notice the scanner was not even turned on. Locke did, the green light was dark.

When the old Agent reach the fifth male—the white one, the wiry male fumbled with his papers. Suddenly, he took a swing at Hiss, catching him on the arm.

Hiss rocked to the side a bit. “Hey--”

The male headed right for Locke, looking like he intended to run him over.

“Govicide Agent Locke!” Hiss hollered.

Locke had a split second to react. He hadn’t tackled anyone in a long time, the last being three years ago and that was an unruly prisoner in handcuffs. This was someone at almost a full sprint.

With just inches to spare, Locke stepped to the side and put his leg out. The male tripped over it. His jaw bounced against the pavement, and he let out an agonizing grunt.

Jamming his right knee in the center of the male’s back was enough for Locke to hold him on the ground. “You okay, Govicide Agent Hiss?” Locke asked, craning his neck to catch sight of his partner.

“Yes, I am fine.” Hiss pointed to the rest of the males. “Get out of here. We are going to make an example of your comrade. And remember, you are all in the System. We are watching.”

The group hustled down the street. Hiss came over to where Locke still pinned the disobedient subject.

“As for you, subject, I am going to get a little revenge on you. Get up.”

Hiss pushed Locke aside, releasing Locke’s knee. With a wheeze, Hiss dragged the male to his feet. Locke smothered a grin watching the five foot six Agent push around a five foot ten Offender. And the age difference must have been twenty-five years.

“You think you can run from us? Nobody runs from Govicide.” Hiss shoved him up against the wall.

For some reason, the male let out a little, yellow-toothed smile. Locke shook his head. This Offender just didn’t know when to quit.

“You think this is funny?” Hiss shouted in the younger male’s ear.

In one swift motion, Hiss pulled him away from the wall and pushed him right through the empty doorway of the nearest storefront. Locke’s eyes widened, thinking his partner might be going too far now.

From inside, the Offender let out a yelp.

Hiss charged in after him.

CHAPTER 13

Down the street, the four remaining Offenders slowed when they saw Hiss handle their comrade.

“Leave before you get the same treatment,” Locke took a few menacing steps toward them.

The four males heeded Locke’s warning and turned the corner.

Locke brought his attention to the inside of the building where it sounded like Hiss continued to rough the male up. A bang. A thump. The Offender cried out. Hiss yelled. The wall hushed their sounds.

Stepping through the doorway, complete darkness met Locke. His eyes needed a few seconds to adjust, so he stayed a few feet from the sidewalk. From his blurred inspection, the OWG equipped this building to be a restaurant in the future. A counter, stools, booths, et cetera. A thick layer of dust covered all of it.

When he grew accustomed to the reduced light, Locke still heard the Offender yelping and grunting. What was Hiss doing to him?

“Are they gone yet?” Hiss’ voice was calm, not even a hint of sounding out of breath.

“Uh, yeah, Govicide Agent Hiss. The Offenders are gone.” Locke directed his voice to the left, where Hiss’ voice originated. “Is everything all right?”

“All is well. Come sit with us.” The words still steady with no trace of haste.

Locke’s eyes adjusted a few seconds later, and he saw why Hiss wasn’t out of breath. Hiss and the Offender sat in a dust-covered booth on opposite sides of a table, hands folded and lounging back like they were old comrades.

“Govicide Agent Locke, pull up a chair and wipe that look off your face. You cannot look surprised if you are going to be an Agent,” Hiss shook his head, frowning.

Blinking a couple of times to make sure he wasn’t imagining things, Locke did as ordered, dragging a chair over and sat at the head of the booth.

“Govicide Agent Locke, this is Robert Wolf. My best spy.”

The spy stuck out his right hand, rubbing his jaw with his left. “Govicide Agent Hiss, you have to teach this Agent to go easy on me. My jaw really hurts.”

“Quit whining, Robert. Govicide Agent Locke shake his hand,” Hiss commanded.

Locke hesitated, still calculating what just happened outside. He shook the spy’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Robert. Sorry about the jaw. I didn’t know this was all a set-up.”

“So, what information do you have for me? Any more news about the cash that disappeared?” Hiss tapped on the table, dust pluming.

Robert spoke a few decibels below Hiss. “Word on the street is it went west. Not all of it, but most of it.”

“Wait a minute.” The tapping’s frequency and volume increased. “You have been telling me this whole time the cash went south. And that is what our WPS devices on some of the stacks said. But now, you are saying it went west?”

“Yeah,” the spy answered, watching Hiss’ hands.

Hiss pointed at Wolf. "It would be nice if you could keep your stories straight."

"Hey, I am just telling you what I know now."

"What changed your mind?" Locke asked.

"Am I allowed to answer his questions, Govicide Agent Hiss?"

"Only if they are good ones. And that is a good one." Hiss nodded at Locke.

"Okay," Wolf took a long breath, "because cash is slowly making its way back here. You cannot tell me that cash went to the Second Continent or over to the Fifth Continent and it circulated back so soon? No way."

"How do you know the cash is back here?" Hiss sat up in his seat.

Wolf reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. Then another. And another. He spread them on the table, trying to flatten them at the same time. Hiss produced a small flashlight from his coat pocket to examine them.

Locke watched, feeling the tempo of his heart accelerate. Being this close to cash was un-mandated—unless you were an Agent. The use of cash killed subjects. The use of it withheld Credits from the OWG. The use of it kept many Goods and Services from the Masses.

If he were still a detective, being this close to cash—even in the same room—would be grounds for execution.

Wolf reached deeper into his pocket and pulled out a device. He set it on the table beside the cash.

The device was no bigger than the card used to swipe in their sex credits, and just as thin. A small antenna stuck out of one end, with a small red bulb the size of a pinpoint on one corner.

Hiss picked it up.

Rubbing his jaw again, Wolf buried his hands in his pockets. "I am sure you can scan the microscopic barcode on that thing. And I guarantee it will be one Govicide planted in the load of cash here. Oh, and it was still attached to this cash when I got it."

"How did you receive this?" Hiss twirled the instrument in his right hand.

"You know I have my ways, Govicide Agent Hiss."

"No, Robert. I do not think you understand." Hiss' left hand crept across the table, seeming to crouch in anticipation of grabbing Wolf. "Where did you get this? When the Offenders get a hold of these they usually destroy them. How is this one in perfect condition?"

Wolf sank deeper into the booth cushion, hanging his head then raising it again. "Alright, alright, Govicide Agent Hiss. I got, uh, the idea from my contact, uh, that they wanted to, uh, send a message," Wolf stuttered.

"What message?" Hiss' left hand remained poised to grab Wolf.

"Well, uh, he seemed to think whoever is moving this cash is one step ahead of Govicide. Ahead of the OWG. And the System. They have a way to detect the WPS's within the stacks of cash and they just go in and take them out. And they want Govicide to know what they are capable of."

Hiss' left hand clicked on the table, its fingernails making small cuts in the dust. The seconds passed, the tapping got faster. Thinking the hand was about to strike, Locke prepared himself to intervene. Then, something caught his eye.

The flashlight illuminated one of the pieces of cash. It was not a “piece,” though. Looking at it, Locke remembered Offenders who used cash called each a “bill.” The light highlighted the edges of the bill where it lay wrinkled on the table.

What caught his interest was a triangle printed on it. While Hiss tapped his hand on the table, Locke reached over. Neither Wolf nor Hiss seemed to watch him.

When Locke touched the bill, he was overcome with an odd sensation, like all the dust in the room landed on his skin. His nerve endings flickered, feeling wrinkled like the cash in front of him.

It didn’t feel like he envisioned. It wasn’t paper. Locke corrected himself. It was paper, but not the kind a subject might write on.

The surface was textured, somewhat rough, like dry skin. But at the same time, the bill was smooth because he could run his finger across it and not feel the ink ridges, as if the ink soaked into the paper.

In varying shades of green, the ink was dark enough in some places to seem black. No part of the bill was white. Even where there was no printing, the paper bore a slight greenish tint.

Locke turned the bill over. The triangle was there, on the left side. But, it wasn’t a triangle at all.

It was a Pyramid.

Good thing the light in the empty restaurant was low. Locke felt sure his expression looked like a train was bearing down on him, and might arouse the suspicions of Hiss and Wolf. Locke glanced at both males. Hiss continued in deep thought, staring at the table. Wolf peeked at his watch as if he had somewhere to go.

Locke rubbed the Pyramid between his fingers. Hiss said something to Wolf but Locke stayed focused on the bill.

Hamilton mentioned the Pyramids. And now Locke found a pyramid on this cash. This wasn’t a coincidence.

Locke couldn’t recall what Hamilton specifically said. The surprise in front of him deflected his train of thought.

He held the cash close to his face. The word “ONE” spread in the center of the back. The bill measured six inches long and a little over two inches wide. In each corner the printer placed the number one, with intricate swirls around each.

A bird perched on the right side of the Pyramid. Locke wasn’t sure what kind. Its wings were spread and its head looked to the left. There were no other words on the back. He flipped it over.

The number one appeared in all four corners of the front, like the back. Swirls and patterns adorned this side, as well. Across the top were the words “Gold-Backed Note.” But most prominent of all was the picture in the middle: the portrait of an old male, older than anyone in the Masses. He had ruffled, gray hair, and faced slightly to the right.

A word was printed across the bottom of the picture in tiny letters. In the poor lighting, Locke couldn’t make it out. Somehow he suspected it was the name of the subject in the picture.

Without thinking, Locke grabbed the light.

“What are you doing?” Hiss broke Locke’s concentration.

“I wanted to see the word under the picture,” Locke answered, his voice cracking.

“The word is Washington,” Wolf piped up.

“Who’s he?” Locke asked, pointing the light into Wolf’s face.

“Hey.” Wolf raised his hand in front of his eyes. “We are not sure. We think it is the picture of the printer. Kind of a self-portrait. An ego thing.”

“This male seems too old,” Locke answered, pointing the light at the bill. “I think you’re wrong.”

Hiss added, “Our cash experts think it is because of the printing method. He probably looks a lot younger in reality. We have been trying to track him down since this cash showed up.”

Locke continued to examine the bill. He wasn’t sure whether to believe Hiss or not. It was plausible someone could be vain enough to put his own image on the bill. But it would put him in danger of getting caught.

A different conclusion flashed in his mind: the male in the picture didn’t exist.

Not now, not ever.

He looked too silly to be an real subject. No male would wear this hairstyle and frilly shirt for a picture in such wide circulation.

But, more to the point, Locke knew who could tell him for sure: Hamilton. He would know this subject and if Washington ever existed.

“Govicide Agent Locke? Govicide Agent Locke?” Hiss shook Locke’s right arm.

Locke jumped. “What?”

“Were you listening?”

“Uh, no. I was thinking about this cash.”

“Robert is going to stay here in the city. Tomorrow you and I are going to take a ride to Cornville where this cash ended up.”

“Cornville? What? Oh, okay. Sounds good to me.” Locke shrugged. “I think Hamilton might know who the male on the cash is.”

Hiss frowned, several more wrinkles appearing.

“I’m serious.” Locke’s voice echoed off the empty walls.

“You know him?” Wolf asked, the words long and slow. He slid a few inches toward Locke.

“I got to interrogate him when Govicide brought him back to Gambling City,” Locke answered.

“What is he like?”

“Well, he’s--”

Hiss pounded his fist on the table, causing a cloud of dust to evacuate the surface, “Hamilton is an Offender against the OWG.”

Locke’s head circled in a split second to his partner. After Hiss asked him about Hamilton’s words after visiting the Gambling City warehouse, Locke believed Hiss’ touchiness regarding the killer had subsided.

Obviously not.

But, if Locke could have finished the sentence he would have said Hamilton was a contradiction, someone who shouldn’t exist but does.

The dust cloud blew away before Wolf spoke up. “So . . . are we done here? I gotta see a female about some sex credits.” Wolf started to stand up, reaching for the cash as he did.

Hiss grabbed Wolf’s hand. “Not so fast, Wolf. The cash goes with us.”

Wolf backed away from the table. “Okay, okay. Sorry, Govicide Agent Hiss.”

Hiss stood. "Where do you want it?"

"Want what?" Wolf walked toward the doorway. Hiss followed him.

Locke watched, rising from his chair. The cash and the WPS were still on the table. He grabbed them.

The Agent and spy stopped at the doorway.

"We have done this before. Do not play stupid with me."

"Oh, right," Wolf sighed. "Like I said, I am going to see a female, so anywhere but the groin. And not in the face, my jaw is already hurting because of him." He pointed at Locke.

"You got it." In one motion, he punched Wolf in his stomach. The spy stumbled out the doorway onto the sidewalk.

Locke grimaced as Hiss followed Wolf out into the light. He had no problem with violence. His scarred fists attested to the fact. But, in all those instances, it was with a purpose. The extracting of information. The throwing of fear into witness and suspects. The art of intimidation.

But, what Hiss and Wolf were doing was different.

Yes, Hiss needed a convincing way to separate Wolf from his comrades. It was a good plan, even fooling Locke.

But now, no one else was there. Just the three of them. Surely no one outside except the limousine driver who didn't matter. No need to continue the hoax. They got what they wanted.

Yet, they continued--Locke corrected himself--Hiss continued. Wolf had no choice but to go along.

Locke came to a conclusion. Hiss liked to inflict pain even when there was no purpose. The new Agent ground his teeth hoping they wouldn't allow any stray words to escape his mouth.

Examining the interior one more time, the new Agent stepped outside.

He wasn't surprised at what he saw.

Hiss stood over Wolf, shouting as if their conversation never happened.

"You tell all of your comrades we are watching. Govicide is everywhere and we are here to make sure everyone gets everything."

Wolf got up and ran down the street, throwing a glance over his shoulder before rounding the corner.

As Locke predicted, no one besides the three of them, and the driver, were on the street. In the end, Hiss and Wolf had staged it for an audience of zero.

"What did you think?" Hiss brushed the dust off his suit. He yanked out a black handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"I think Wolf gave us some pretty good information," Locke answered, running his fingers over the cash in his pocket.

"That is not what I meant. What did you think about how we set this whole thing up? Pretty clever, huh?"

"Yeah. Very." Locke kept his head turned so Hiss wouldn't see his eyes rolling.

"You better clean yourself off before we get in the limousine. I do not want you to get the interior dirty."

Locke's eyes fell to his suit. At least Hiss was right about one thing. The new Agent was a mess. The haze of dirt rose from the fabric as Locke patted himself down.

“I think a train leaves early for Cornville tomorrow morning,” Hiss added as the driver opened the back door for him.

Locke finished brushing the dust off.

He wished he could brush off his increasing doubts about Hiss with as much ease.

CHAPTER 14

Hiss poured himself another drink as the limousine left the curb. He swished it down in one gulp, grinning at the end. Locke pulled the cash and WPS out of his pocket.

“Oh, almost forgot about those. I got caught up in punching Robert.” Hiss made no effort to take them from Locke.

“What do you think these Pyramids mean?” The words escaped before Locke could stop them.

“You mean that triangle? Who knows? Decorative I suppose.” Hiss shrugged, picking at dirt still attached to his suit.

“That’s all they are? Just artwork to make these bills look nice?”

Hiss’ head swiveled like a slammed door. “Bills? You are learning fast. I did not know you knew what these were called.”

“I’ve heard it around.” Whispering, the words came out as if through a peephole. He didn’t need Hiss thinking Locke knew more than he did.

Hiss studied Locke then he eyed the bills. Locke’s hands played with them, his fingers causing the paper to flutter against his silk pants. How many times now had his tongue gotten him close to trouble?

After several seconds, Hiss seemed to lose interest in what Locke said. He poured himself another drink. Locke guessed Hiss would have to fill out additional paperwork if he continued to drink at this pace.

Locke’s hands steadied. He rubbed the bills amazed the OWG could get so upset by such delicate pieces of paper. He understood why the OWG hated them but could they be an actual threat to the OWG?

He thought not. Cash could be burned. Cut into little pieces. Crumpled up in a ball and thrown away. They could be lost or left behind.

The OWG Credit Bureaucracy was better. It disbursed the credits monthly to the Masses and kept track of them with the System. Every subject in the OWG, except Govicide workers, received the same amount: 500. Locke’s credits would increase to 1000 at the start of next month.

These credits couldn’t be taken or destroyed like this cash, unless the OWG subtracted them. And if they were, the goal was to help the OWG. If a subject didn’t use the credits during the course of a month, the OWG took what was left back. There was no way for a subject to save credits. As a result, no subject ever had more credits than anyone else. Everybody started each month the same, and they all ended the same--at zero.

“You might find this interesting, Govicide Agent Locke.” Hiss cleared his throat. “I passed the Govicide test on my eighteenth birthday. After training, one of my first captures was my uncle who was secretly trading food with a comrade for years.”

Listening, Locke rubbed the cash.

Hiss continued, “I was proud of my devotion to the OWG. And I felt even better when my uncle left prison ten years later.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my uncle thanked me for my devotion to the OWG. It filled me with joy that I got my uncle to behave like an obedient subject. My uncle lived out the rest of his years with total loyalty to the OWG by being a spy for Govicide. He died at the age of sixty-one because the System calculated he was too expensive to keep alive.”

Locke noticed tears running down Hiss’ face. “You miss him.”

Hiss shook his head. “Oh, no. I hated him. I am just so happy for myself I could get someone to love the OWG again.”

“Oh.” Locke paused, feeling the need to reciprocate with a story. “My mother died when I was young, having succumbed to the flu at the age of twenty-eight. My father raised me, along with the OWG. But, he died when I was nineteen. He’d worked as an OWG bus driver and got killed when the brakes failed. The bus went through an intersection and smashed into a light pole. My father got ejected from the bus because his safety belt failed, too.”

Hiss nodded, his eyes still red.

Locke continued, “The OWG investigated the crash, in the end saying the bus crashed due to subjects using cash. Not enough credits were available to fix the bus properly. The bus had been used, even though it was defective, because the OWG calculated there were too many subjects in that area of town anyway. If a few died in a bus crash, more Goods and Services would be available for other subjects.”

“That is true. Cash kills,” Hiss responded.

The new Agent rubbed the cash hard enough to feel his fingertips start to go numb. This paper killed his father. Though, he had a difficult time hating it. Yes, it was mandated that he should, but something about it left him fascinated instead.

“In fact, the OWG was happy my father died, since my father’s death allowed other subjects to get more Goods and Services. I received fifty credits good for an entire year instead of the usual month. The subjects on the bus who lived got ten credits deducted per month for a year since they should’ve died.”

“Too bad for the OWG. Those deaths could have saved even more credits.” Hiss shook his head.

The two Govicide Agents told war stories on the way back to the Hotel. As they did, Locke wondered what Hiss would do with a girlcomrade pregnant under un-mandated circumstances? If he was a new Agent, and she got an abortion, he’d be disciplined for withholding vital information. If his girlcomrade had the fetus, he’d experience the same consequences.

They would put Hiss away like anyone else. His OWG devotion wouldn’t save him.

Locke enjoyed thinking about Hiss painting himself into a corner. However, this all pre-supposed a female would use her sex credits with Hiss. Locke didn’t think even being an Agent helped Hiss’ chances with the opposite sex.

By the time the limousine pulled up in front of the hotel, they were famished, choosing the OWG Restaurant in the Hotel. Since they were Govicide Agents, they got to order “off the menu.” If they’d been regular subjects, the choices would consist of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, macaroni and cheese, and ham sandwiches.

Eating out cost more credits than staying in, so the Masses ate out infrequently.

Govicide Agents had the choices of steak, lobster, and prime rib.

This was Locke’s first time seeing the “other menu.” He thought it was a joke when the OWG Waitress brought it.

Hiss recommended ordering a steak cooked 'medium'. It came with something called a baked potato. Locke had eaten potatoes before, but in raw or boiled form. The foil-wrapped potato looked foreign to him. He sliced the potato, exposing the soft and flaky insides. The steam invaded his nostrils. With butter and pepper added, once again with Hiss' recommendation. Locke savored his first bite. He loved it. Boiled potatoes would never be part of his food choices again.

Hiss inhaled his food, chewing with his mouth open. Locke imagined subjects walking outside could hear Hiss devouring his food. In between bites, Hiss regaled him with stories of catching Offenders, beating males and even females.

Throughout the meal, Hiss treated the waitress like an Offender, too. Though he ate everything, he complained about all of it. The cook under-prepared the potato. The napkins were not big enough. The steak had too much fat. The temperature of the room needed lowered.

The waitress put up with it, smiling as if she recently received five extra credits. What choice did she have? Hiss was a Govicide Agent.

When Hiss left to go to the bathroom, Locke apologized to the young female for Hiss' behavior. She responded saying Agents were allowed to behave the way they wanted since they provided everything for everyone. It was only right.

Right. That word again. His thoughts whirled between the cash and Hamilton until Hiss returned to the table.

Darkness eclipsed Dale City by the time they finished. Hiss made arrangements for them to take a train to Cornville the next day at seven in the morning. The Masses taking the train arrived several hours early. Govicide Agents, on the other hand, could get there at the last second and get seats. Hiss told Locke to meet him out front at 6:32.

Locke sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes. Dust still covered them from the Wolf meeting two hours ago. He wiped them off with a bathroom towel, trying to make them sparkle. His feet didn't hurt after a day of wearing them, so Hiss must have done a good job picking them out.

After one more shine, he placed them at the foot of his bed.

How many times had he cleaned blood, and other bodily fluids, off of his old Homicide shoes? Fortunately, Jade never found out he washed them in their living quarters' sink.

Thinking of Jade, Locke called her with his new phone. She'd just gotten home from her work and she sounded glad to hear from him. He told her about the flight, the Hotel, and the dinner. She asked about his day but he reminded her there were restrictions on what he could say about ongoing Govicide investigations. The sooner she realized that, the better. This wasn't Homicide, where he could tell her everything.

Plus, all phone conversations went through the System. It wasn't common knowledge to all subjects, but Locke knew on good authority the System scanned for certain words during all phone conversations. Cash, Offender, un-mandated, and a bunch of other words caused a yellow flag to show on the System's big screens.

She told him about her day. There were no secrets in the OWG Transportation Department. There were still problems with the air and rail system in the northern part of the Fifth Continent and the west part of the Fourth Continent. The track sensors went out occasionally, sometimes for hours at a time, for no apparent reason. Upon landing, OWG Pilots reported their instruments went haywire near the area. More and more, the OWG

was ordering them to avoid the area. It was just a fly-over area any way, she added, since no one could live there.

“How are you feeling?” He had to be vague, since anyone could be listening.

“I feel fine,” she answered.

“Head, feet . . . stomach?” Locke didn’t think naming body parts would set off any warnings. Still, the words came out as a whisper.

“Stomach feels fine. No queasiness. No throwing up.” Jade connected the dots.

“Good.”

“Any fix, yet?”

“Uh. No. Still researching.” What else could he tell her?

“So, what time are you coming back tomorrow?”

And this conversation had been going so well. “We’re not going back to Gambling City tomorrow.”

“Why not?” Locke heard her vocal cords stiffen.

“You know I can’t tell you that. OWG work,” Locke answered, glad he could avoid the blame by putting it off on Govicide.

“I thought—“

“Jade . . .” He couldn’t allow her emotions to get the best of her and set off the System. “We can’t talk about this now.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back in Gambling City in no time.”

“You think so?”

He doubted it but the hope would calm her down. “Very possible. I’m going to bed now. The OWG allows me to love you.”

“The OWG allows me to love you too.”

They hung up and he set his phone on the nightstand. Out of habit, he opened the drawer to the stand. The OWG Manual sat there. This one had been used, its edges somewhat cracked, but its cover still possessed the unmistakable blackness. He thought about thumbing through it then decided against it. The studying from a few days ago refreshed his knowledge plenty.

Shutting the drawer, he lay down studying the ceiling. He felt like he had forgotten to do something. He sat up, remembering Hiss told him the phone needed “charged”—was that what Hiss called it?—every night.

Locke grabbed the phone again and popped open the back, flipping out two prongs that could be connected to an electrical outlet. He plugged the phone into a socket by his bed, and stretched out on the mattress again.

Before long, his eyes closed and he fell into a deep sleep, not bothering to undress or pull down the covers. He didn’t even shut off the lights the drowsiness came upon him so quickly.

CHAPTER 15

Waking from his peaceful sleep, Locke bolted up in bed. His eyes shot to the clock. 1:08am. He scanned the room. No one there.

What woke him?

He felt fine. No headache. No stomach ache. No pains. But, his heart raced and a layer of sweat covered his entire body.

Locke shed his clothes, leaving on his underwear. Pulling back the covers, he put one leg under them, but stopped when he tasted the dryness in his throat.

In the bathroom, he filled his glass with cold water. Two swallows drained the cup. Turning the light off, he couldn't wait to get in bed.

A patch of white made him stop mid-step. Something sat at the base of the room's door, standing out against the brown carpet.

A letter-size packet.

Had someone entered his room? When he squinted at the envelope again, he realized it was thin enough to have been slipped under the door.

Stepping over the package, he peered through the peephole.

Nobody there.

He pushed the packet away from the door with his foot then turned the knob, opening it one degree at a time until a sliver of light infiltrated the darkness. When the opening increased to a foot wide, he slid his torso out until he could peek up and down the hall.

No one. No footsteps. No sounds from the stairwell.

Shutting the door, Locke flipped on the light and focused on the mysterious delivery.

Printed on the white surface was a large U, written in black pen. The shape of the U was unusual. The sides weren't totally vertical, like someone had pulled them outward.

Picking up the packet, he noticed it weighed next to nothing. He flipped it over, and found no writing on the other side. Was it empty?

Locke brought it over to the table next to the darkened window.

Maybe Hiss received more information and didn't want to wake him so he slid it under the door. Maybe Wolf remembered some additional info and not only slipped the information under Locke's door but Hiss' as well. Or, maybe the front desk obtained train departure information for the Agents and slipped the info under both of their doors.

Those all seemed like possible ideas. But, what did the U stand for? He searched his memory trying to recall if any OWG Department used a singular U as its logo.

He shook his head. He couldn't think of one.

Inch by inch he ripped the envelope open. Halfway across the short side, he realized it contained only a single sheet of paper. It was unlined and covered with blocky handwriting.

Pinching the paper between his thumb and middle finger, he pulled it out. The words on the sheet caused him to drop it on the table.

Hello Govicide Agent Michael Locke. Congratulations on Jade's pregnancy!

Like the statues inside the District's Memorials, Locke couldn't move. Anger sprouted and began climbing the walls of his abdomen. Its fingers crisscrossed, overlapping each other, working their way inside his ribcage and neck. They came together at his larynx.

"Who did she tell?" Locke screamed, not caring if a sleeping neighbor heard him.

He read the letter again. A hundred times. Every time the words laughed at him a little longer, a little louder. The two sentences becoming emblazoned on his retinas.

Anger twisted itself inside of him until it became fear. Somebody besides himself and Jade knew about her pregnancy. It didn't matter how somebody knew. It only mattered whom.

And whoever it was had no problem taunting a Govicide Agent.

Did Hiss write it?

No. If Govicide found out anything about Jade's pregnancy Locke would have been questioned by now. But, here he was. In Dale City. In a hotel. At 1:15am. He'd eaten a great dinner. Ridden in a limousine. Flown here with Hiss in an SST.

If Govicide knew, they wouldn't handle it this way. Its style was more confrontational than an envelope under a door. They came straight at subjects who ignored mandates.

But if it wasn't Hiss, then who? The hotel's registration book would have false names for him and Hiss. Somebody couldn't just flip through the book and find an Agent's room.

Out of the corner of his eye, Locke saw his reflection in the window. His legs bent at a slight angle, his arms out in front like limbs on a tree, his finger crooked, the fear now circulating through him.

The image in the window broke him out of his spell.

In one leap, he pressed his nose up to the warm pane. He didn't know what he hoped to see. Somebody running away. Somebody in the shadows. Somebody jumping onto a bus at the last second.

No movement. Not a bus. Not a subject. Not even a cat or dog. The street possessed as much life as an OWG morgue.

He had no intention of giving up, though.

In seconds, Locke dashed out the door, not caring about his state of undress. His bare feet tore at the carpet as he ran fifty feet to the far end of the hall. He flung the exit door open and stopped to listen. No footsteps. No sounds of shoes on the stairs.

Without hesitation, he retraced his steps past his door to the other stairwell. Closing his eyes, and doing his best to tame his bucking heart, he listened.

He was rewarded.

From above--at least a flight--came the sound of someone on the steps. And the subject was getting closer.

Who was coming down the stairs? Hopefully the subject who wrote the message.

Locke ducked down behind the stairwell door, waiting for the subject to pass the landing. He'd be able to watch them through the window, then make his move and get them from behind.

The clinking sound of footsteps descended toward Locke. He pasted himself against the door, heart pounding the metal, his hands gripping the safety bar that locked it in

place. His legs shook, his body on edge, ready to push his frame through the door and into whoever appeared on the other side.

The footsteps were close, so close Locke felt the vibrations. He and whoever it was were on the floor, within yards of each other. Peeking through the window, what he saw made him do a double take.

A female about Jade's age rounded the corner. White, blond, about five-four, skinny but not rail thin. She carried a large, black bag. Dressed in dated non-black clothing, she didn't seem in a hurry.

Locke hadn't expected a female. No matter, he needed to check her out. He pushed the door with enough force for it to bang against its stop, reverberations ascending and descending the stairwell. "Where are you going?"

"Who wants to know?" Spinning on her right heel, she turned to face Locke. Neither the sudden sounds of the door or his voice made her jump.

They stood, seven feet apart, eyeing each other. The stranger dressed in blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and blue shoes. Locke . . . in his underwear.

"I'm Govicide Agent Michael Locke."

"Really?" Placing her big bag on the floor, she inspected him from the top of his head to his bare feet. "So, I guess the rumor's not true."

"What rumor?"

"That Govicide Agents wear black underwear, too."

He looked at his white boxers and couldn't help but smile. The fear and anger shrank to half their size. But the female wasn't getting off that easy.

"This is an emergency. Who are you?"

"Who are you?" She shot back.

"I told you. I'm a Govicide Agent. Let me see your OWG ID."

"Where's your badge? Your scanner? Your phone?"

"They're back in my room," Locke pointed behind him.

"Uh-huh. Pretty convenient," she looked down her nose at him.

"I'm telling you . . ." He took a quick step toward her.

She backed up, grabbing her bag. "Don't make me hit you with this."

"Okay," Locke stopped, almost stubbing his toe on the sticky, waxed floor. "Take it easy. I'm telling the truth."

"You know it's un-mandated for subjects to pretend they're Agents?"

"Come with me to my room and I can show you I'm telling the truth." He turned toward the stairwell door, motioning her to follow.

She shook her head and laughed, "Do you have any idea how many males have tried that on me?"

"I'm not lying."

"And every Agent is supposed to carry his badge with him at all times. But you don't have yours. Exactly how long have you been one?" The female leaned against the wall, still holding her bag.

This would be a hard one to explain to a subject. None of the Masses knew about his promotion. "Two days."

"Two days? You've been an Agent for two days? Now I know you're lying." She descended the stairs. "You're a little old to have passed the test."

"And you look a little young to be all white."

“Who says? In any case, I’m 32, well beyond the mixed race cut-off line. But thanks for the compliment.” She took two more steps.

“Wait--” Locke grabbed the banister.

She stopped, craning over her right shoulder. “What?”

“Show me your OWG ID and I promise not to bother you anymore.”

“Mr. Locke, or whatever your name is, I’m not showing you my ID. Try to see it from my perspective. If I show you my ID and you are who you say you are, you’ll hunt me down because it’s un-mandated to argue with an Agent, even an Agent dressed like you are and who has no badge.” She took another step down, away from Locke. “On the other hand, if I show you my ID and you’re not who you say you are, then I have broken the mandate saying subjects must only show ID’s to Agents and no one else. So . . . I’ll have to pass on your request.”

The female had a point. She knew her OWG Manual well.

“Then, what are you doing out here this time of night?”

She took one more step down toward the next landing. “Only an Agent can ask me that question. And I don’t think you’re an Agent.”

“Then let me search your bag.”

“Why? So you can take something out of it and get me mixed up in some un-mandated trade scheme? Do you think I’m stupid?” She pulled the bag against her chest.

This female had an answer for everything. And she was correct on all counts. If he were in her position, he’d do the same.

“Let me go to my room. Get my badge and I’ll be back.”

“And how do I know you won’t come back with two or three of your comrades who like to run around in their underwear?”

“I’m here alone,” Locke answered, edging closer to the stairs.

Two more steps and she was on the next landing turning the corner. “Why don’t you just tell me why you’re out here and maybe I can help you, whether you’re an Agent or not?”

“I can’t.”

“Then, I can’t help.” She disappeared from his view.

Locke heard her familiar “clink, clink” steps echoing on the next set of stairs. “Just tell me . . . have you seen anybody out here tonight?”

“No, Mr. Locke, I haven’t. Good night.”

He stood there until he heard her footsteps faded. Not long after, he heard the door at the bottom open and shut. And the female was gone.

Could she have been the subject who slipped the letter under his door?

He replayed the conversation with her. She’d been relaxed. No body language suggesting he caught her doing something she shouldn’t have been. She quoted the Manual with no problem, knowing how she was supposed to act when a possible fake Agent confronted her. Requesting to see his badge, forbidding Locke to search her bag, etc. She handled him right by the book, like any good subject.

No, she wasn’t the subject he was trying to find.

That subject had escaped.

Locke stood there, hoping another avenue would reveal itself instead of him returning to his room.

Nothing came to mind. And plus, what could he do? Confront another subject in his underwear? Without his badge? He'd already learned the hard way that wouldn't work.

As he returned to his room, a singular question circulated between his ears. How did news of Jade's pregnancy make it from their Gambling City living quarters to the envelope in his hotel room in Dale City?

If Jade did slip, it seemed a stretch she would just happen to squeal to a subject who could track down an Agent in a different city fifteen hundred miles away.

Maybe she requested something alerting the System to her pregnancy. But, he'd explicitly warned her about that. She couldn't have forgotten so soon.

He fell into the chair at the table where the letter still lay. The words didn't sneer at him as much. His nerves still stampeded but at least there was a fence around them. A strong one.

Reading the two sentences over and over, he sensed the sarcastic quality to them. "Congratulations" sounded more like, "Too bad for you, subject. You sure got yourself in trouble this time."

Why had the writer written out, "Govicide Agent Michael Locke"? Was it so important in this secret letter he be addressed in the proper way? Why not just put "Michael" or "Locke"?

And how about the "Hello"? Locke picked up the letter, bringing it closer as if he would see more. The "Hello" felt so . . . comradely. Why was it not just "Hey"? Or "Dear"? Or forget the salutation altogether and start with "Govicide Agent"? The word felt like it had a happy tone. Who could be happy Jade was pregnant? He and Jade weren't even happy about it.

Unless the writer intended to blackmail Locke . . .

That would most certainly make the sender happy.

He placed the letter on the table and pulled the chair over to the window. The clock read 1:40am. He didn't see himself getting any sleep and he hoped Hiss wouldn't notice in five hours.

The darkness made the hotel window act like a mirror. It reflected the picture on the wall behind him. It was a picture of a male in black armor with the white letters OWG on his chest slaying a dragon with a strange mark on its back. The mark looked like the letters F and E intertwined.

Over the following minutes, the moon crept its way into Locke's view. A quarter lit tonight. The OWG visited it once several years ago. The project cost millions of credits to get the three astronauts there and back.

Millions of subjects received reduced Goods and Services as a result. Soon after, the Exalted Ruler suspended trips there until the OWG could do both at the same time. Then a few years ago, the new Exalted Ruler mandated the moon was a waste of time and credits. The OWG would never travel there again.

However, the OWG still used spacecraft to maintain its satellites. Without them, Goods and Services couldn't be provided. Agents couldn't communicate. Offenders couldn't be caught.

The clock crawled past 2:30am. Snatching the envelope off the table, he evaluated the U. Why had it been written that way, with the ends out at angles?

Locke grabbed the letter. He held both the letter and the envelope in front of him, comparing the writing. The handwriting for the letter was Grade A. The small u in “Congratulations” was OWG Manual perfect.

Then, why was the U on the envelope so badly written?

Maybe two different subjects wrote them. One subject put the U on the envelope and another one wrote the letter? That seemed laborious.

Plus, both writings were in black ink. Had each been in different colors, Locke could believe the “two writers” theory. Otherwise, one subject wrote this.

The paper and envelope were standard OWG issue. The writer had been smart to not use anything unique.

But, had the writer been smart enough?

Subjects of the Masses acquired paper and envelopes in large packages with bar codes on the outside. What the Masses didn’t know was that each sheet and envelope had a bar code. The bars were microscopic and could be scanned but not seen. Locke remembered hearing something about this during the Hamilton investigation from a Govicide Agent. The bar coding of paper had been very hush-hush so as to catch subjects who might write hate letters to the OWG.

Would this piece of paper and envelope have the bar codes on them?

Locke set them on the table. Aiming his scanner at the bottom right hand corner of the letter, the scanner let out a soft beep. A barcode. Locke pumped his fist and turned the scanner over to read the display.

Nice try the display said.

“Dang it,” He wound his arm back to throw the scanner against the wall. A trickle of sanity kept his grip tight on it as his arm followed through. He didn’t want to explain a destroyed scanner to Hiss.

And, somehow he knew it wouldn’t be that easy. Nobody would leave a message like this for an Agent if it could be traced. At least whoever did it had a sense of humor.

Just in case, he checked the barcode of the envelope, finding the same message.

Locke grimaced, putting the scanner back in his bag.

Maybe he was going about this the wrong way. This required more Detective than Agent. And if this were a murder case, he would arrange the facts.

So, what were the facts?

Whoever did this knew Jade was pregnant, he had gotten recruited by Govicide, envelopes and paper had microscopic barcodes on them, he was in Dale City, and he was staying at this Hotel.

The last fact gave him an idea. He called the lobby from the room phone. The line rang three times.

“Hello, Govicide Agent Locke. How may I be of service to you?” the night worker answered.

“Did anyone ask for my room number today?”

“No, Govicide Agent Locke. And if anyone had, I would never have given it out. I know what the mandate is.”

No one would be stupid enough to ask for a Govicide Agent’s room number and, likewise, no one would be stupid enough to give it out. But, it was worth a shot.

“How about this? Has anybody been in the lobby today? Anybody walk through? Somebody you didn’t recognize? Somebody you don’t think is staying here?”

“No. I am sorry. Should I have?”

“I noticed you have cameras in the lobby. Do they work?”

“They work but they do not record. The OWG has not manufactured tapes for them since it went to the new System.”

Locke rolled his eyes. “Yes, of course. So nothing? No one?”

“No, Govicide Agent Locke. I am sorry. Will I be punished for this?”

Locke heard the clerk’s fear flow through the line. “No. Not this time. But did you happen to see a blond female leave an hour and a half ago? She was carrying a black bag.”

“I am sorry. I did not.”

“Are you sure?” Locke gripped the phone tighter.

“Yes. But there are four different exits on this floor. She could have gone out one of those. Many workers do. Will I be punished for not seeing her?”

“No.” He dropped the phone on its receiver, adding another fact to his list. Whoever did it knew the ins and outs of this hotel.

A subject could go a long way with secret information on an Agent. A blackmailed Agent ignoring a few counterfeit barcodes could help an Offender get around the System. Locke couldn’t remember any reports of Agents being caught for conspiring with Offenders and he doubted it ever happened.

And he didn’t want to be the first.

But, if blackmail was this Messenger’s goal, why not put it in this letter? Why not just come right out and say it? Maybe they wanted him to worry about it to soften him up, allowing Locke to think of all the horrible possibilities. Just to see him squirm.

Well, it was working. He felt like squirming all right.

Locke saw one good point in all this, though. For once, he was glad someone knew more about him than the OWG did.

If the OWG knew about this, he and Jade would be in prison already.

CHAPTER 16

Locke didn't sleep. In fact, he couldn't remember blinking. He watched the sun move inch-by-inch, rising about the skyline. It flushed Locke's room with yellow rays, overpowering the light he'd left on.

As if on cue, the street below became active again. Buses, subjects on bikes, pedestrians. Locke heard someone in the next room running the shower. On the other side, someone flushed a toilet.

The clock said 6:03am.

Picking himself off the chair, he lumbered over to the shower, his feet feeling delicate from last night's run through the halls. He flipped on the hot water while he went to the bathroom. He was going to flush, but it might turn the water cold.

He showered for ten minutes, feeling like he could have bathed the entire day if the water stayed hot. These days, in a fancy hotel like this, the hot water lasted twenty minutes. Maybe longer.

He shaved. No more Homicide Detective stubble allowed. Maybe he should grow a goatee like Hiss. The razor paused on his cheek. No, Jade would hate it.

Brushing of his teeth made him glad he still had all thirty-two. Many subjects his age didn't.

He remembered Hamilton's teeth. They were perfect.

Teeth.

The word stuck out to him.

Did it mean something?

He sloughed it off and continued brushing. His attention drifted to the dark rings under his eyes. They made him look fifteen years older. He hoped Hiss wouldn't notice them.

At 6:25am he finished dressing. At 6:29am he arrived out front.

Hiss was already there. "How did you sleep?"

"Great," Locke answered with a second-long smile, shifting his feet.

"Good. Because we have a long day ahead." Hiss frowned, shaking his head. "And, Govicide Agent Locke, your suit is much too wrinkled. We have a dress code and right now you are out of code. You should carry an iron with you always."

Had Hiss been more attentive he would've noticed Locke's bloodshot eyes. Locke studied his suit, noticing a few wrinkles. Was it really that bad? But if Hiss said it wasn't in code, who was he to argue?

In minutes, they were off to the train station. Locke hid the letter and its envelope at the bottom of one of the bags. Even if the bag fell over while opened, they wouldn't fall out.

Before long, the limousine pulled into the train station. Unlike the cavernous and unpopulated airport, it was over-populated and roughly the size of the Homicide office. It didn't seem big enough for everyone who wanted to ride. In fact, had the train station been the size of the airport lobby, it still would've been packed.

Locke noticed Hiss. Arms crossed, biting his lip, tapping his left foot. He got the feeling being around the Masses terrified the older Agent. Locke had been one of the Masses. Hiss hadn't. He'd been a Govicide Agent for forty years. He always flew on SST's and drove automobiles. He never had to ride a train. Govicide Agents dealt with a few of the Masses at a time. They never experienced a crowd like this.

"Thank the OWG we don't have to stand in line, right?" Locke nudged Hiss.

No reaction.

Within moments, the Masses noticed there were two Govicide Agents in their midst. The yelling and talking ceased. Each of them bowed toward the Agents, even turning toward them when Hiss and Locke followed the limousine driver through the crowd.

Seconds later, their bows complete, a few of the Masses approached Locke and Hiss. Then a few more. Before long, a crowd gathered around them as they tried to make their way inside the station. The Masses stretched out their arms, trying to touch the Agents.

Hiss swatted at their hands, sidestepping left and right to avoid touching them. Locke, in contrast, smiled and nodded. It was far from the anonymity of Homicide.

The crowd chanted, "Thank you for the Goods and Services." "Without you we would not be able to live." "Thank you for allowing the OWG to run our lives." "Please collect all the credits you can."

The limousine driver acted like a plow, using the bags to push the Masses aside.

"Maybe we should get an automobile instead?" Hiss shouted over the crowd, even though Locke stood right next to him.

"No. It'll be fine. They love us," Locke answered. The adoration almost made the paranoia and fear from last night disappear.

The driver knocked enough subjects out of the way to make it inside. None of the Masses gave them a hard time about going right to the front. They knew better.

Hiss and Locke didn't need tickets. They zigzagged through the station, out to the platform, and boarded. They picked a berth nearest to the door. The driver left their luggage and exited the train.

They sat, watching the subjects labor to get on the train.

"I cannot stand being around . . . them," Hiss sneered, his left hand scraping at his pant leg.

Locke stayed quiet. He observed the Masses and thought the exact opposite. He enjoyed being around them. He could identify with them. He had been in crowds like the one outside his window many times. He knew what they were feeling. What they were thinking. He saw their faces and saw his own.

The Masses boarded and the train lurched forward, beginning the seven-hour trip. Locke rode a train to Cornville during the Hamilton investigation but he'd come from Mile High City to the west. That nine-hour trip started out in the mountains and ended in the plains. This one would be nothing but a flat ride.

The hours of wakefulness took a toll on Locke's eyelids, pulling him into dreamless sleep.

Locke woke up, checking his phone for the time. He estimated Cornville was still a half hour away. The seat had cut off some circulation to his lower legs over the five-hour nap, so he stood to get the blood flowing again.

“I thought you said you slept last night?” Hiss eyed him over his OWG Monthly Newsletter.

“I did. Sometimes riding in moving vehicles puts me right to sleep.” Locke shook his legs out and sat back down.

“I called a spy who is going to meet us at the station. He discovered a bunch of cash floating around outside Cornville.”

“So, Wolf was right. That cash made its way out here. Not to the South as was originally thought.”

“But I still cannot figure out why the cash went this way. I got this pad out to try to brainstorm some reasons the cash would come here. But I could not come up with any.” Hiss showed the notebook to Locke. Except for the heading, “Reasons,” the page was empty.

Locke’s attention drifted out the window. “Me neither. Even when I visited here the first time I couldn’t figure out why Hamilton chose this location. This place is pretty out-of-the-way.”

“Dale City, Gambling City, Snow City, Red Star City.” Hiss said them like he held Hamilton’s list in front of him. “All major cities. Lots of subjects. Lots of Goods and Services. Of course, lots of buildings. And then there is Cornville.”

“Yeah. Cornville. Can’t see any relation between those places and here.”

The train slowed. A few buildings appeared outside. Before long, it pulled into the station. This one was no different than the last one: crammed.

Locke and Hiss grabbed their bags, having to carry them themselves this time. Once again, their presence caused a hubbub. Subjects bowing, yelling and chanting.

Out front, a male, with the attire of an OWG Coal Miner, held a sign: Govicide. He didn’t say anything but led them to his truck.

He took the Agents’ bags, threw them in the back, and got in the driver’s side. Locke noticed Hiss wait for their contact to open Hiss’ door for him. When he didn’t, Locke watched a scowl appear on Hiss’ face as if he made a mental note.

Hiss opened the front, passenger door himself and got in. Locke would’ve given a few credits to read Hiss’ thoughts right at that moment.

Once they were all inside, the male opened up. “Govicide Agent Hiss, it is nice to finally meet you. I am Ames.”

Ames spoke with an accent Locke forgot was used in this area. His words sounded cut off as if he was in a hurry to get to the next one. And the words came out like they were being squeezed through a funnel.

Hiss and Ames shook hands across the seat. “Yes, I am Govicide Agent Hiss. This is newly recruited Govicide Agent Locke.”

Ames and Locke shook hands but he remained focused on Hiss. “Oh, yes. I remember Govicide Agent Locke. But he was just a Homicide Detective at the time.”

“You remember I came here a year and a half ago?” At least someone remembered him, Locke mused.

“Oh yes, Govicide Agent Locke. I follow such matters. Hamilton was a bad subject. You and Govicide were very good to catch him.”

“Well, I had some help from Govicide.” Always a good idea to credit Govicide.

“Lots of help.”

“Ames, this is not our usual transportation. Where is our limousine?” Hiss asked.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, a limousine would have a lot of trouble where we are going. So, I borrowed this from the OWG Land Use Department.”

“But you did not tell them we were here, correct?” The parental tone seemed to slip from Hiss’ mouth with the ease of breathing.

“Oh, no. I told them nothing. And I filled out the proper paperwork as well.”

“Good. Where are we going?”

“To an area that has not been used for a long time. An area far outside town.” Ames’ eyes shifted back and forth between the road and Hiss.

Locke slouched, surprised to hear they would not be staying in Cornville. Hamilton killed Govicide Agent Roberta Hansen downtown in the bathroom of an OWG Drinking Establishment. Neither he nor Govicide figured out why she was there. Hamilton dressed as a female to kill her.

“What are we going to find out here?” Hiss asked.

“You need to see for yourself.” Ames’ shifty eyes glanced at Locke and Hiss then he affixed the bloodshot orbs on the road.

They traveled for forty minutes, the sun dipping with every mile. Without warning, Ames slowed the truck and made a left, but Locke saw no road. The vehicle bucked, left and right, as Ames drove into a field like many they passed since leaving Cornville.

After twenty shaky minutes, their journey ended at a chain link fence. From where Ames stopped, the fence extended out in opposite directions. Locke couldn’t see the end of it.

“We are here.” Ames put the truck into park but left it running.

“Where is here?” Hiss asked, looking out his window.

“You will see, Govicide Agent Hiss.” Ames flipped on a set of floodlights attached to the truck’s roof.

Pointing, Locke noticed it first. “Look . . .”

Out in front of the truck, the wind blew pieces of paper, most of it green. The fence acted like a strainer, allowing the wind through but nothing else. The paper became plastered up against the metal, trying to sneak through, but to no avail.

Locke opened his door.

“Where are you going?” Hiss shouted into the backseat.

Jumping out, Locke didn’t answer.

Locke slammed the door of the truck. The wind swirled around, blowing Locke’s tie and the bottom of his suit jacket. Pieces of trash hit him in the face, legs and chest then fluttered away. He couldn’t catch any with his hands.

He stepped out in front of the headlights, scraping a piece of trash off the fence.

Just as he thought: It wasn’t trash at all.

It was cash.

Hundreds of bills, floating around out like a green tornado.

Locke stuffed the first one in his pocket. Then scraped more off the links, stuffing his pockets until they bulged like the excitement within him.

He held the next one he snatched in front of the headlights. Instead of the number one, “100” was printed in each corner. A different male pictured, not the one with the wig. This male on this bill was bald on top but with long hair in the back. Locke couldn’t read the name but it looked like it started with an “F”.

When he turned it over, the bill almost escaped his hands as the wind ripped at it. He tightened his grip. The back had a picture of a building in the middle, somewhat like Govicide Headquarters but not quite. The building spread out with a second floor in the middle section and a clock. There were trees in the background. It was the same size and shade of green as the bills in Dale City. The only differences were the pictures and the numbers. There was no Pyramid on this one.

Ames beeped the horn.

Locke turned and shielded his eyes from the glare of the lights. Hiss waved for him to return to the truck. He jogged back and got in, fighting gusts the whole way.

“Whew, windy out there.” Locke pulled the cash out of his pocket and handed it to Hiss. “It’s all cash.”

Hiss took the bill. “Turn on the interior lights.”

Ames hit a button on the dash. The interior lit up.

“There must be a hundred of these floating around out there,” Locke said between breaths. The wind had taken a little out of him.

“How did you know these were here?” Hiss asked Ames.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, my sources are confidential.”

“And I am a Govicide Agent. Nothing is confidential when I have a need to know. How did you find out these were here?” Hiss reiterated, taking his eyes off the bill.

The spy adjusted his position in the driver’s seat, moving further from Hiss.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, I am sorry but when I agreed to-- ”

Hiss punched Ames in the mouth, the spy’s head thudding off the driver’s window. Locke jumped in his seat. The punch had to have dislodged a couple of teeth.

Grabbing Ames by his jean jacket, Hiss pulled him close. “You want to think about your answer again?”

Ames tried to wipe the blood from his mouth but Hiss knocked the informant’s hand away and pushed Ames against the driver’s door. Hiss knelt on the seat, wheezing but not retreating. Locke sat frozen, surprised Hiss resorted to violence so soon.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, it was a male, who knew a male, who--” Ames was almost crying.

“Do not give me that,” Hiss shouted as he grabbed Ames again and slammed him against the driver’s door.

Locke thought about sticking his arm out to stop Hiss but didn’t, thinking the rampaging Agent might rip it off.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, I never see . . . ” The spy struggled to get any words out now. More blood than words came out.

The Agent breathed like a locomotive. Ames was lucky. If Hiss was in better shape he could’ve pinned Ames against the door forever. Instead, Hiss backed off, although Locke believed this might just be the beginning.

“Get out,” Hiss sounded like he was ordering lunch.

“What?” Ames swiped at the blood with his sleeve.

“I said get out. Or do I have to drag you out of this truck?” Hiss took the time to flatten out his suit before sitting straight in his seat.

Taking a peek at Locke, Ames seemed desperate for help. He wiped his mouth again. A few tears gathered by the bridge of his nose.

What could Locke do? When a Govicide Agent asked questions, a subject was mandated to answer, even if the answer was unspeakable. And any answers would've been better than the ones Ames had given.

So, Locke could only state the obvious, "You better do what Govicide Agent Hiss says."

Ames pulled the handle on the door and got out.

"You know it's too far for him to walk back to Cornville." Locke stated after the door slammed shut.

"I know that," Hiss yelled.

"You didn't have to hit him. He was scared enough as it was."

Hiss slid over into the driver's side.

"What are you doing?" Locke pressed himself against the front seat.

"Scaring him some more." Hiss jammed the gear lever down into drive.

CHAPTER 17

Hiss pressed the gas and the truck jerked forward, throwing Locke against the rear of the cab. The wheels grasped for traction as the crazed Hiss spun the steering wheel left and right. Locke flew against the passenger side with his legs ending up over his head. He couldn't see what was happening, but he heard the engine screaming.

Righting himself, Locke saw Hiss had Ames in his sights. The spy fled sixty feet ahead, head turned back, eyes wide. Hiss gunned the engine and the truck bounded over the small dirt hills and indentations in the ground. One second the headlights pointed toward the sky, the next toward the ground. Hiss kept going straight, right toward Ames.

"What are you doing?" Locke grabbed Hiss' right shoulder, but Hiss shrugged it away.

Ames stumbled just a few feet ahead, his face solid with terror, blood still running from his mouth.

At the last second, Ames jumped out of the way but the front bumper caught him. He flew out of range of the headlights. Hiss screamed, "Yeah!" and slammed the brakes. Locke's momentum almost launched him into the front seat.

Before Locke could right himself, Hiss spun the truck around and jumped out, leaving the door open.

Regaining his composure, Locke located Hiss through the dirt haze, stalking in the direction of where Ames must have landed.

Locke got out and followed, stumbling over the uneven ground to catch up to Hiss. "You could've killed him. We need him."

"Oh, he will be fine. He will talk now. Where is he?" Hiss meandered at the extreme range of the headlights, almost making a complete circle.

"I don't see him," Locke answered, squinting.

"That Offender is around here somewhere," Hiss grumbled. "We will find you, Ames. Do not try to hide," he yelled, laughing.

Hiss and Locke walked in opposite directions. Locke didn't have a flashlight like Hiss, and he stumbled over rocks, dirt, and brush. He saw nothing in the dark. He'd have to trip over Ames to find him.

Which is exactly what happened.

Locke hit the ground, hard enough to rip a hole in his pants.

"Found him," Locke yelled.

Ames made no sounds when Locke tripped. Locke stood up and knelt next to the spy, jostling his shoulder. "Ames . . ."

From thirty feet away, Hiss pointed his flashlight.

Locke's stomach sent convulsions up his throat at the sight.

The spy wouldn't be answering any more questions. It looked like one of the truck wheels had run over the male's head when he fell. His skull was flattened on one side. A look of terror still etched on Ames' face. Jaw stretched, eyes protruding.

He didn't appear to have any other injuries. Even the leg Hiss hit seemed unbroken.

“That’s just great,” Locke muttered, covering his mouth at the sight. “He can’t tell us anything now, can he?”

“I did not want to kill him. Only break his leg,” Hiss responded, his words shallow as a puddle.

Locke didn’t believe him. The driving had been too reckless, Hiss’ emotions too genuine. “So, what’s the procedure? We have to call this in.”

Hiss let out a chuckle that grated on Locke’s tense nerves. “Call in? We do not have to call this in.”

“Why not?”

“You forget your OWG Manual already?” Hiss seemed to search his memory. “Chapter 6, Section 9. Any subject or subjects who inhibit a Govicide investigation may be dealt with by any means necessary since subjects are not more important than the OWG, the System, and Govicide. Not word for word, but you get the idea.”

Locke knew the chapter and section. But did it mean Govicide could run over a subject with a truck? “Okay, what do we do? Throw him in the truck bed?”

“No, we will leave him here. Animals will consume him. In a few days he will be nothing but bones.” No compassion from Hiss, he kicked some dirt at Ames’ body.

“Just leave him?”

“Yes. Govicide Agent Locke, is there something you want to say?” Hiss pointed the flashlight at Locke.

Locke felt lucky the light wasn’t a stun gun. “All I’m saying is subjects will ask questions. That chapter may say we can do anything we want. But when someone notices Ames isn’t around anymore they’re going to wonder what happened.” The pitch of Locke’s voice rose, his Homicide experience echoing in his words.

“Who? Govicide Director Stallings? The Govicide Board? Who are you worried about asking questions? Because I will tell them the absolute truth. I ran this subject over because he would not talk. And nobody is going to care.” Hiss took a few steps toward Locke. Only three feet remained between them.

“I’m not worried about them.” Locke lowered his voice, feeling Hiss’ encroachment. “I’m more worried about someone like Hamilton. We start going around roughing these Offenders up, some Hamilton type is going to retaliate.”

“There you go with Hamilton again. You do not need to tell me about Hamilton. He murdered my partner.” Hiss and Locke stood chest to chest.

“I investigated the murder. Remember, Govicide Agent Hiss? I don’t want your current partner to get killed. Did you ever think for a second that your partner got murdered because of you?”

Locke watched his words hit Hiss like a fist. Hiss opened his mouth then stopped. Maybe Hiss was not by the book after all.

The punch to his gut gave him the answer. The searing pain made Locke fold over, almost smacking his head into Hiss’ chest.

“You say that again and I will run you over with this truck, too.” Hiss stomped back to the truck, leaving Locke with his face inches from the dirt.

Locke might have gone a little too far. But, running over and killing of Ames pushed him over the edge. Not only was it careless--an action of emotion and not thought, but it left them at a dead end. Ames would’ve talked if he’d been properly motivated.

In retrospect, he had no idea why Hamilton murdered Hiss' ex-partner. He'd spoken in a fit of anger. And he shouldn't have. But did his words deserve a punch?

Straightening back up, he rubbed his stomach. He would have a bruise there tomorrow. Today's lesson: Don't mess with Hiss.

With a nauseous feeling rivaling any bout of food poisoning, Locke dragged himself back to the truck. He got in on the passenger side.

Hiss drove the vehicle over to the chain link fence. "Keep your eyes open for an entrance or a sign. Something that will tell us what this place is."

They reached one end of the fence with no luck. Staying close to the fence, Hiss turned to creep along the next length. They bounced along in silence.

It appeared as unspectacular as the surroundings. No distinguishing markings. No flaws. No fallen poles. No breaks in the rusty links. The OWG built it to last.

After more bumpy riding, the second quarter-mile length ended, still revealing no clues. They followed the fence around to the next side, directly opposite from where they started.

With the high beams on, Locke could almost see to the end of this section. But at their speed, the boundary seemed to go on forever.

"Hey, I think something's out there." He pointed out in front of the truck.

"I see nothing." Hiss pressed the brakes.

"It's a gate. Pull around and point the headlights at it."

Hiss swung the truck around.

"Did you feel that?" Locke grabbed the door handle.

The truck was moving but had stopped bouncing.

"No bumps," Hiss responded, stopping the truck up against the gate.

They exited the truck.

This wasn't ground but pavement. Granted, pavement covered by weeds and brush. But, at some time in the past, this was a road.

Hiss joined Locke at the front of the truck. He pointed his flashlight at the ground.

"Pavement," Hiss said.

No kidding.

His stomach still aching, Locke jogged to the gate. Grabbing each side, he shook them. No luck. A chain and padlock kept them shut.

When Locke took his hands off the fence, the rust became powder on his palms. He smacked them together.

"This thing's old. Probably one of the first things the OWG Construction Company built," Locke remarked.

"But why?" Hiss asked. His calm demeanor belied the fact that he'd just killed a male.

Locke examined the chain and lock. He noticed something odd. "Point your flashlight over here."

Hiss did so.

The chain and padlock were clean to the point of almost being shiny. Locke rattled the chain. "These are new." The wind whipped Locke's tie in his face. He tucked it into his shirt. "Somebody has been here recently." Locke gazed into the area. "I'd like to see what's in there, but we don't have any bolt cutters. How are we going to get inside?"

“I know how,” Hiss answered, grinding his heel on the pavement and limping to the truck.

Locke had no doubt what was next. Hiss meant to drive right through the gate.

Backing the truck, he stopped fifty yards away. The old pavement would make his run up smooth enough to gain some speed. This would’ve been impossible had he tried it going over any of the other terrain.

Hiss gunned the engine. The truck sprayed dirt, weeds, and brush from under its rear tires. The clumps pinged off the rear fenders.

It accelerated, headlights brightening the lock and chain. Taking one last glance at them before getting out of the way, Locke flipped the padlock over.

Something caught his eye.

The vehicle barreled toward Locke, its revs increasing in Locke’s ears. With every inch under its wheels, the lights got brighter on the gate.

And illuminated a U scratched into the padlock.

Identical to the one on the envelope.

Shrieking behind him, the truck’s motor charged toward Locke. His mind told him to get out of the way but his eyes wouldn’t leave the U.

In one lightning quick moment, his mind scrambled through a logical progression like water down a spout. The U on this lock and the cash flying outside the fence wasn’t a coincidence. Meaning, the pregnancy message with a U on the envelope was linked to this cash. The cash had been linked to Hamilton through the timing of his murders. That meant . . .

The engine’s roar finally pierced Locke’s concentration.

Why was Hiss not slowing down? Locke was directly in his path.

Locke swiveled, arms waving trying to stop Hiss. But the headlights were relentless fireballs.

Did Hiss mean to run him over, too?

CHAPTER 18

Locke dove out of the path, visions of Ames' body flitting through his mind. The front bumper almost nicked his right ankle, and he felt his bones crunch as he hit the ground. He'd been just a step faster than the unfortunate spy.

He heard the truck crash through the gate, the popping of the hinges and the clanging of the links. The sounds ceased with the locking up of the truck's tires on the old pavement. Raising his head from the dirt, a brown cloud, the size of his living quarters, drifted away from the headlights in his direction. He turned his head but it was too late. The particles lodged in his lungs, starting a coughing fit he fought for several seconds.

There was no time to waste. Climbing to his feet, Locke sprinted inside the fence line, searching for the broken remains. He came upon the damaged gates off to the right side of the truck and out of headlight range. Several feet separated them, a sure sign the chain had broken.

He knelt in the dark feeling for the padlock, hopefully in the vicinity. The old road was warm from the afternoon sun and coarse, marking his palms with gray soot. Locke heard the shuffling footsteps of Hiss approaching.

"What were you doing? I almost ran you over," Hiss huffed.

"Yeah, if it wasn't for my quick steps you would've," Locke answered, too engaged in his activity to look up. He would have loved to give Hiss another piece of his mind but he had a bigger concern.

"Were you trying to stop me?"

"Uh, no. I was signaling you were clear." Now was not yet the time to tell Hiss about the U. Too risky, given how Locke discovered it.

"Next time do it out of the path of the vehicle," the old Agent suggested, once again with the tone Locke was growing to dislike.

"Yeah, stupid of me." Enough of that topic. "Can you point your flashlight down here?"

The beam lit a circle fifteen feet around Locke. He picked up the chain but the lock was gone.

"What are you looking for?" Hiss let out a grunt and crouched.

Locke reiterated his doubts to himself. He couldn't tell Hiss about the U on the lock. Not yet. "Never mind," he answered and stood up, his joints reminding him of his recent dive.

He would have to let it go. It was enough knowing the U linked Hamilton to the letter for now. He made a mental note to investigate the U further when he got back to Gambling City.

Locke surveyed the rest of the area, noticing a large block several yards out in front of the truck's headlights. "What's over there?" Locke pointed.

"Looks like a slab of concrete," Hiss wheezed, standing up.

"You mean like the foundation of a building?" Locke dropped the chain at his feet. Without the padlock it meant nothing.

"Could be."

The two Agents walked toward the block. It wasn't what Locke expected. From far away, it appeared to touch the ground. Instead, upon nearing, Locke noticed just the slimmest of space between it and the pavement. The slab was about the same width and length of a floor of OWG living quarters, except it stuck out of the ground up to Locke's mid-section.

Hiss and Locke circled to the right. Maybe a crane dropped it there.

Locke stepped close and ran his hand over the cement. Strange. Locke slipped his hand into the gap. He felt a space of no more than a few inches.

"This slab doesn't touch the ground." Locke showed Hiss.

Hiss squeezed his stubby fingers into the space. "What is this?"

They continued around the slab, feeling two long steel strips, like train rails, embedded in the sandy terrain. The rusted strips extended about fifty feet, parallel to each other. Locke guessed each weighed several tons.

Hiss circled the slab again, leaving Locke to stand in the dark. He felt like he was in the dark, figuratively, as well. Where would someone spend cash out here? The anti-OWG cash had no use among the dirt and weeds. There were no subjects. No Goods and Services. No place to store the cash. If anything, the cash should have stayed in the warehouse. It should have stayed in Dale City.

A minute later, Hiss returned. "Getting too windy and cold out here."

Locke followed him back to the truck. Before Hiss shut his door, he turned the heater on full blast.

Locke spoke first. "What do you think?"

"I get the feeling we are being led on a wild Offender chase. That is what I think." Hiss put the truck in reverse and backed out past the fence.

"A wild Offender chase? What do you mean?"

"It means if I had not run over Ames before, I would do it now." Hiss stopped the truck and changed gears.

"What about the cash flying around? What about the new chain and padlock on the fence? What about the--" He bit back his words. He'd almost said, *what about the U on the padlock?*

"What about what?" Hiss leered at Locke before pulling out onto the rough terrain.

"Nothing. Never mind." He gnawed his cheek.

"What I mean is this. Ames took us out here to get us off the trail. A big waste of time. They got some bills from wherever and put them up against the fence to make us think something was going on. No Offenders would be here. Nothing but a fence and a bunch of concrete."

"You sure?" The truck hit the bumps a little too hard. Locke grabbed the armrest to hold on, like he did in the SST.

"Sure? Govicide Agent Locke, when you amass the years I have, you can see a scam a mile away. These Offenders were just trying to get us off their trail. Nothing more."

In twenty minutes, they were on the highway. They rode in silence. Locke wondered about the etching on the padlock and plodded through his logical progression from earlier.

If the U and the cash were connected, and Hamilton and the cash were connected, then . . . Hamilton and the U were connected.

Whoever pushed the envelope under Locke's door belonged to Hamilton's crew. Locke and Govicide took two years to catch Hamilton, and somehow Hamilton's comrades discovered Jade's pregnancy in a matter of days.

Locke felt like his insides dropped out of the truck, landing on the roadway to be run over like Ames.

During the two-year investigation, Hamilton was always a step ahead of them, deciding every move they made. Murder in Snow City, Locke was there. Agent dead in Francoville, Locke was there. Wherever Hamilton struck, Locke would be there, always too late until the final time.

Hamilton led him around all over the World, like there was an invisible rope connecting them.

And he was still in control.

The killer—well, his comrades—controlled Locke with knowledge, not action now. But the action would come soon enough. A threat. Blackmail. He could picture it. Agent Locke, either you do what we tell you or we're telling the Director about Jade.

When would it happen? Tomorrow? The next day?

And how would it be delivered? Another letter? Face-to-face?

The only way to stop it would be to catch them. And catching them might give Locke and Jade some leeway to get an abortion.

A good place to start was to answer why the cash was there. However, he had no idea.

The truck hummed, sounding less like the death machine from an hour ago. Hiss sat at the wheel, seat pushed way back to fit his girth. Locke noticed him lean up every so often, stretching out. Maybe it was a back problem.

Watching his partner, Locke came to a conclusion about the cash: Hiss was wrong. This trip to Cornville was not a scam. He might've agreed with Hiss if not for the U on the lock. That sealed it for Locke. The cash was out there for a reason.

Someone, somehow, transported the cash out there. According to Wolf, if he could be believed, contents of the entire warehouse had been moved. But the cash flying around was a fraction of the amount in the Dale City warehouse.

Over a year had gone by since Hamilton killed the Govicide Agent in Cornville. Meaning, the cash had been out there a year. With the wind like the kind they felt tonight, all the cash could have blown away. So, it was at least possible the entire load of cash could have been there at one time before the wind took it away.

And then there was the padlock. Why lock it at all? The site had no purpose.

Locke tried to take each logical avenue, but he always ended up at the same idea.

The U was intricately connected with the cash and the murders, as much as Hamilton.

Hiss parked the truck in a vacant lot, explaining Agents could never be seen pulling into the train station in such an ugly vehicle. Locke thought back to Hiss wondering where their limousine was when they first met Ames.

Hiss called the Local Authorities and gave instructions where the truck could be found. He commanded them to wipe it down erasing all fingerprints, also telling them to fix the front bumper and grill. And to not ask questions. There was no mention of Ames. Or the cash. Or the fence. Hiss hung up and dialed another number. During this phone call, he gave directions to where they could be picked up.

“I think there is a nine o’clock train to Dale City,” Hiss stated, hanging up a second time.

“We’re not staying here?” Locke liked the prospect.

“No. We need to get back to Dale City. We will fly back to Gambling City tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” Locke suppressed a smile.

Fifteen minutes later, the limousine picked them up and whisked them to the train station. It was nearly empty. The Agents walked to the train without all the fanfare and attention that greeted them before. Hiss was surely relieved, but Locke kind of missed it.

They took separate berths. Hiss selected one toward the front of the train; Locke picked one toward the rear. This was more due to Locke’s choice than Hiss’. He needed distance after the evening’s action.

He did have a question before they said good night.

“What am I supposed to say if anyone asks about Ames?” Locke asked as Hiss stepped into his berth.

“If Stallings asks, tell him the truth. If a subject asks, throw him or her in prison.” Hiss slid his door shut, seemingly closing the topic in his mind.

Once his bags were stowed and the train started moving, Locke pondered Ames’ death while lying on his cot. In terms of the System, Ames would be one more disappearing pixel. Nothing more. His family would wonder what happened to him. Of course, they’d never find out. At some point, they’d receive a few credits to shut them up. Then, they’d go on their way, never to mention Ames again.

Locke couldn’t ignore the irony he’d spent twelve years investigating homicides and, two hours ago, he’d taken part in a homicide that would never be investigated. The family would never get the answers Locke always hoped to provide as a detective.

But, they’d get over it. All bad feelings waned in time.

And Hiss carried on like it was simply procedure. Sure, deaths overall were a bonus for the OWG. But Hiss seemed to get some kind of enjoyment out of scaring and then killing Ames. He claimed he didn’t mean to do it. But Locke wasn’t so sure. He got the impression Hiss did it for fun.

On the other hand, Ames knew the rules. Nothing impeded a Govicide investigation. Not even murder. The OWG Manual was explicit. There was no higher calling than to make sure the OWG got its credits and provided Goods and Services by any means necessary.

Something unexpected popped into his head. A voice. Saying something specific. Saying something he heard before.

People have no rights when the One World Government is never wrong.

Hamilton.

His voice clear as it was the first time.

Locke still had no idea what “rights” were. And he wasn’t sure he would ever know. But, was Hamilton trying to say the OWG mistreated its subjects?

How could the OWG be wrong? The OWG gave everything to everyone. Ames’ murder, although unneeded, happened during the course of investigating Offenders who didn’t have the OWG’s best interests in mind. His death was mandated.

The ends justified the means. Didn’t they?

The train rocked Locke to sleep.

His hand lay on his bag containing the letter and envelope.
His mind focused on how to resolve the growing reservations within him.

CHAPTER 19

The train's screeching brakes wrenched Locke from his peaceful sleep as it pulled into the Dale City station. He met Hiss on the platform. The old Agent's sparse hair was messed and even his suit showed wrinkles. Locke kept his opinions silent.

"Govicide Agent Locke, I made some calls. Somebody is going to check the Cornville area out, but they think it is a building site that never got finished. Thought you would want to know."

Their limousine driver grabbed their bags, and they were off to the airport.

During the SST ride to Gambling City, Locke planned his talk with Jade. The trick would be doing it without his full emotions showing. He was upset with her for not being more careful. But if he were too accusatory, she'd give him the silent treatment. And neither of them needed extra complications.

But, she'd be at her work when he arrived. For a moment, he debated going directly there to confront her. The unanswered questions would eat him up until he spoke to her.

On the other hand, he didn't want to cause a scene. He could see no way to have the conversation if others were around. He'd have to wait.

The SST landed with the smoothness Locke began to expect. No limousine waited for them. Instead, Hiss' automobile was there and a similar one for Locke. Somebody in Govicide Logistics thought it better they drive their own automobiles. But, there was a problem: Locke never operated a vehicle before.

Hiss gave Locke a tutorial on the basics of driving. Locke, palms sweating, gave close attention as Hiss showed him how to start the engine. How to use the gearshift. How to use the turn signals. Everything else Locke would have to figure out himself.

Locke drove--more like steered--around the airport parking lot a couple of times to get a feel for it. He avoided two light poles and a parked bus, coming within inches of both. Otherwise, he did fine.

Hiss squealed out of the lot when Locke proved he could drive at a satisfactory level.

Adjusting his mirrors and looking both ways per Hiss' previous instructions, Locke pulled out into the street. His nerves made him clumsy with the pedal. His right leg shook. The car accelerated to a point he felt was too fast. Hitting the brake, the car stopped, almost throwing him into the steering wheel. A few miles passed before he found a happy medium.

In the limo, the trip would've taken twenty minutes. With Locke driving for the first time, the trip took an hour. Two wrong turns added time to the journey.

The empty streets stood out to him. Once in a while when riding the bus he sometimes noticed it was the only motorized transportation on the streets. But, it didn't seem odd. Now that he was driving, it was more than odd. For blocks he saw no other vehicles at all.

At the next intersection, the first vehicle appeared. He watched a bus drive right through a red light, not even slowing down. The driver smiled as though he ran lights all the time.

The OWG “overbuilt” the roads to prepare for the future when all the Masses would have automobiles. But, didn’t the overbuilding take away from the Goods and Services that could be given to the Masses now?

So many signs were posted along the streets for drivers but most subjects rode buses and walked. The bus drivers drove the exact same routes every day. The signs weren’t needed. Why hadn’t he noticed before?

But what did Locke know? The Exalted Ruler planned everyone’s future, so there must be a plausible answer.

Pulling into his living quarters complex, he had no problem finding a place for the automobile. Why were there so many spaces for automobiles when nobody drove them? He smiled and shook his head. How could he have lived in this complex for so long and never paused to think about the excess room for them?

Locke left the keys in it. Nobody here knew how to drive anyway. Plus, driving a Govicide automobile without permission was an automatic death sentence.

Lugging his cases inside, he dragged them to the bedroom. Jade wouldn’t be home for seven hours. Until then, he knew how to spend the time: researching the U.

With the vigor of an OWG Ditch Digger, he dug until he found the envelope and letter at the bottom of his smaller bag. A few minutes later, he sat at the computer, waiting for the dial-up connection on the OWG Web.

Using his Govicide ID, he accessed websites off-limits to the Masses. He could retrieve maps, encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, and history items. All of it was unavailable to regular subjects of the Masses since the information was irrelevant to being a good worker for the OWG. Govicide, however, could use these tools to catch Offenders.

For the next four hours, he ventured through these sites. He concentrated on different typefaces, hoping to find a style resembling the U. He had to be careful, though. Even though he was an Agent, the System would still track his movements.

The System monitored where everyone went on the OWG Web. The Administrators found this a good way to read subjects’ thoughts. The OWG Statisticians determined there was a ninety-eight percent chance an OWG website visited by one of the Masses reflected that subject’s mind. Following subjects’ patterns could do just as well as any mind-reading invention.

In his case, the System would predict Locke was interested in different styles of type. Thus, it wouldn’t raise any attention. Plus, he was an Agent now and would get a fair amount of leeway in his searches.

But, caution was always the concern while using the Web. Agent or not.

Locke leaned back in the chair and blew out a breath. Nothing came close to the U on the envelope and the padlock. Times New OWG, OWG Black, News OWG, OWG Helvetica, OWG Geneva. None of their U’s came close.

After hours of relentless searching and comparing, Locke took a break. A hammer pounded right behind his eyes. His neck ached right at his shoulders, like somebody took a flame to it. His fingertips ached from all the typing.

He stretched, walking to the eating room and back. Staring out the back window, he remembered Stallings standing at the large one in Govicide Headquarters during his interview. For a second, he thought there was something about Stallings during the interview. A kind of disconnection when he mentioned Hamilton.

Maybe Locke just imagined it.

Reinvigorated, Locke sat at the computer and tried a different path. What could the U stand for? Getting a pen and a piece of paper, he wrote down everything he knew about the case, from what Hiss told him, to what Locke knew but Hiss didn't.

The warehouse. The cash. Hamilton. The Pyramids. The Cornville place. Ames. Wolf. Fourteen Agent deaths. He listed all of these topics and what he knew about each one.

He took a few moments to try to decipher what they all had in common. The answer? Nothing. They seemed to point in one direction but he didn't know which one. Just reading all the clues made something about all of it feel bigger, even bigger than Hiss imagined.

He made a list of words starting with the letter U, hoping one of them would fit.

Unusual. Unruly. Uncommon. Underhanded. Unpleasant.

None of the words rang true.

A picture of Hamilton formed in his mind. He was only fifteen minutes away. He could ask him.

No, he told himself. That was un-mandated. He'd already been caught with the murderer once.

And even if it were allowed, would he have the courage? Locke remembered how they stared each other down, with Hamilton getting the best of him. Those black eyes, unwavering, daring Locke to punch him. Hamilton sat there in the room knowing there was no hope of escape but it didn't faze him.

No, he wouldn't confront Hamilton. If the U meant something important, Hamilton wouldn't explain the mystery anyway. The murderer talked in riddles.

Maybe there was another side to this. Locke learned early on that every homicide scene was a representation of the killer. Murderers--males and females alike--were no different in their craft than OWG Writers. Different subjects killed in different ways, just as different writers used a variety of words to explain the beauty of the OWG.

Whoever this group was, they liked to leave their mark. There was no reason to put the U on the envelope. There was no reason to etch a U into the padlock. And since Hamilton was affiliated with them, maybe he left a mark? Could U's be found at the Hamilton's murder scenes?

The photos of them were available at the Homicide Department. Locke couldn't access that computer from his living quarters, not even with his Govicide ID. He picked up his phone and began to dial the limousine but then he hung up.

The System would register a Govicide limousine in proximity to Hamilton. And in any case, Locke was sure Govicide instructed the limousine driver to avoid Homicide.

Could the limousine driver drop him off close by? He could walk the rest of the way.

No, too suspicious.

Wait, a minute! Locke slapped the computer desk. He had an automobile. Why not drive himself?

He could get in with an old Homicide key he had somewhere. The computer access would be recorded but shouldn't raise a flag unless a System operator delved into all the code. He could look through the photos with no problems.

Locke could get into Homicide, find out what he needed to know, and get out without causing a stir.

A noise at the front door broke his stream of thought. Jade.

He met her in the hallway.

“You’re home,” Jade screamed, rising on her tiptoes to kiss him, but Locke shied away. “What? What’s wrong?”

“We need to talk.” Locke marched into the living room.

“What is it?” She followed him but not too close.

He planted himself in the middle of the living room floor, hands on hips. The U was of no concern now. Not Hamilton. Not the cash. She’d better have a good explanation. His fingers dug into his sides like steel claws.

Jade, purse in hand, lowered herself onto the couch as if the cushions were needles.

“Who knows about your pregnancy?” Any louder and their comrades next door would hear.

She jerked her head back, her face distorting. “My pregnancy? No one. Why?”

“Really?” He ripped the envelope containing the letter off the computer desk and handed them to her. “Read it,” he commanded, crossing his arms.

She opened the envelope, not admiring the U on the front. She scanned the words, eyes going wide.

“You still want to tell me you didn’t tattle to anyone?” The comrades next door heard that, for sure.

Jade lifted her eyes to him. “Yes, Michael. I didn’t tell anybody. No one. Where did you get this?”

“No one? No one?” The pent-up anger spewed out of his mouth like lava. “Somebody knows!”

He ripped the letter out of her hand. She flinched, shrinking into the cushions.

“I’m telling you. I haven’t told anybody,” Jade wailed, eyes brimming with tears.

Pacing the room, he did his best to divert his anger anywhere but to his mouth, afraid he’d say something regrettable. “I woke up at one a.m. yesterday to find this envelope with the U on it slipped under my hotel door.” He stopped, eyeing her.

“What does the U stand for?” she stuttered.

Locke pointed at her. “Don’t get me started.” He paused. “What did we say about how we needed to keep this quiet, huh? What did we say? We knew if this got out we’d both be done, right?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” Her tears dripped off her cheeks like dew.

“Then tell me how a letter gets slipped under my door in Dale City when nobody anywhere is supposed to know about your pregnancy?”

It seemed every pint of water within Jade found its way to her tear ducts. Locke’s lava cooled. Somewhere down deep he believed her. She’d always been honest with him, even when it hurt. But, if that was the case, how could this letter exist?

He waited a few seconds, then sat on the couch, putting his arm around her. “I’m sorry. I believe you. There’s something going on I can’t tell you about,” he whispered. “I’m beginning to think it’s something huge. That’s all I can tell you. And whatever it is, the Offenders behind it know about our problem.”

“How could they know?” she asked between sobs.

“You got me. They just do. I’m sorry for yelling at you. I have a lot on my mind.”

He kissed her cheek. He wished her could tell her more but he knew she’d be appalled if her told her everything, especially the part about Ames.

Standing up from the couch, his right knee twinged reminding him of last night's dive. He gathered his belongings.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Homicide. It's time for some answers."

No limousine. No driver. No tracking.

CHAPTER 20

Night crept over Gambling City by the time Locke reached the Homicide office. It took thirty-five minutes to get there, mainly because he couldn't find the knob for the headlights. Hiss neglected to point it out. He drove with them off the entire way.

Pulling up, he felt like he'd never left, like this building was still his workplace. The detectives would be gone. None of them liked to put in any overtime. If a murder didn't get solved that day, it could always wait for tomorrow.

He used his old office key to open the front door, having found it in his living quarters' computer desk. It sat there the entire time during the Hamilton hunt. By complete accident and forgetfulness, he didn't turn it in days ago.

Locke smelled the aroma of old coffee, passing the desk where the receptionist made a pass at him a few days before. Through a series of double doors, he entered the office area where Hamilton yelled out the sentence that still bothered Locke. Everything appeared the same. Desks cluttered. Paperwork stacked anywhere a space could be found. Pictures of murderers on the bulletin board. A half-eaten OWG Donut on the edge of a desk.

The Homicide computer waited for him, humming on standby. He punched a couple of keys and the screen came to life.

Crime scene photographers downloaded their pictures into the computer, so all of them could be accessed without having to thumb through stacks of photos. He found Hamilton's file. It was ten times larger than any other. Not surprising. Hamilton's work was prodigious as much as it was mysterious.

With a few clicks of the mouse, the list of each murder victim appeared on the screen, listed by date. The murder of William "Billy" Cardon, Hiss' partner, was first. A murder Locke knew all too well. He died two miles from where Locke sat.

He clicked on Cardon's name and the screen changed. The file listed all the information from the case. Cardon's height, weight, date of birth, etc. It detailed his murder. A blue box highlighted the word, "Photos." Locke clicked it and the screen changed again.

Locke winced, reliving the moment from over two years ago. Also remembering he didn't believe the reports it was a Homicide Agent until he saw it for himself.

In the first picture, Agent Cardon lay prostrate on his back, a thick wad of rolled-up pamphlets sticking out of his mouth. The picture was taken from about ten feet away, Cardon's feet in the foreground and head in the background.

Locke studied the picture as the rest of the memories returned. Getting the call, being told he'd better not botch the investigation, taking four different buses to get to the scene.

Studying the picture further, he saw it as the starting line, the scene that put him in a race against time. He didn't know it then, of course. Yet, had this crime been committed anywhere else, he believed his current problem wouldn't exist. Somehow, events would have happened in a different order and Jade wouldn't be pregnant against a mandate.

If only . . .

He also remembered thinking the crime would be solved in no time, as most Homicides were.

If only . . .

And he'd be able to continue with his life in whatever way the OWG planned.

If only . . .

Locke clicked the right-pointing arrow on the screen and the next picture appeared. This was a similar picture taken from the side. Cardon's head was on the left, feet on the right, revealing Cardon's bulging eyes and his distorted throat. The OWG Medical Examiner said the killer, whose name wasn't known at the time, stuck the OWG pamphlets eight inches into Cardon's windpipe. Bruises on the Agent's chest revealed the killer sat on top of Cardon to do it.

Locke imagined being there, his eyes glazing over and the screen going out of focus. Cardon thrashing around trying to get Hamilton off him, while the murderer held the Agent on the ground. Hamilton reaching for the pamphlets and stuffing them down Cardon's throat. The Agent gasping for air as the killer pushed them in further. And it all ending in a decrescendo as Cardon's body with each ticking second moved less and less until it never moved again.

The picture show Cardon's throat distended from the pamphlets still being stuck there. Locke cringed, his own throat reverberating. Some of Hamilton's other crimes scenes were even more gruesome.

Picture after picture, he sifted through the entire gallery, not seeing anything unusual like the U.

He was about to click the arrow one more time, when he noticed something. A mark on the ground beside Cardon's body. The camera flash had been strong enough to brighten it. The mark was far enough from the body that it wasn't in the close-up pictures.

At first glance, it looked like an unusual footprint. But instead of the entire print, it looked like just the heel of a shoe made an indentation in the dirt. Locke clicked on the picture to zoom in.

It wasn't a footprint.

It was a U.

Locke's hand fell from the mouse. His body jerked back, the chair going up on two wheels for a split second. His heart accelerated to the speed of a bird's wings.

Somewhat nondescript, Hamilton drew the U in the ground three feet from the body. No wonder Locke and everyone else missed it.

Going back picture to number one, he viewed them again but none of them showed the U. All the photos were either too close or from the wrong angle.

Determination building like the construction of a new OWG complex, he selected the next file, "Govicide Agent Bob Dunphy." Hamilton murdered him in Snow City on the northeastern end of the Third Continent. By the footprints in the snow, Hamilton stalked the Agent then attacked him in a park at night. The killer strangled him and stuck a Govicide scanner into the Agent's rectum. When a passerby spotted Dunphy, the Agent's pants were around his ankles and he lay on his stomach, the scanner pointing in the air.

Like the first set of pictures, this series started with shots from ten feet away. Locke clicked through several pictures before he found what he was looking for. Once again, the

U was non-descript, several feet from the body and the size of a place mat, blending into the snow cover. Hamilton drew this U in the snow like he drew the other one in the dirt.

Locke shook his head, a combination of astonishment, anger, and happiness melting together.

Photo after photo, file after file, murder after murder, he discovered the U in every scene.

The seventh Agent killed, Elizabeth Klebb, had been murdered in Canal City in the northern area of the Second Continent. Hamilton ran her over with her own automobile. In the investigation, Locke determined Hamilton pick-pocketed the keys then ran her down on a sidewalk. In this set of pictures, the U was drawn in Klebb's blood. To the untrained eye it appeared to be an oddly shaped puddle.

The ninth murder, Govicide Agent Victor Fielek, was poisoned in Sun City on the Fourth Continent while eating pasta, a food Locke still had yet to try. Hamilton constructed the U out of a single strand of spaghetti. It looked like the rest of the strings on Fielek's plate.

The twelfth murder, Govicide Agent James Dewey, was found strangled in his limousine on the Sixth Continent in Reefville while his driver ran in to pick up his Govicide suits. The bottom of Dewey's tie was pinned to his shoulder. Locke didn't know the reason at the time. Now he did. Pinning it there turned the tie into the shape of a U.

File after file. Picture after picture. Frame to frame. Screen to screen. He relived the past two years of his life. He didn't appear in one picture, but he knew the entire story. He was part of the story but not in it. Just like a detective should be.

He remembered where he was standing during every shot. Just off camera to the left. Just off camera to the right. Right behind the photographer. Ten yards behind talking to a witness. And the whole time he missed this major clue.

If he'd been more alert, he and the Govicide Agents might have noticed the U before more Agents got killed. Before Ames had gotten killed. Before Hamilton's comrades found out Jade was pregnant.

A little voice spoke from the back of his head. *Hamilton can explain it. He's only a short walk away. Go ask him.*

Locke's rational side ignored the temptation. Hamilton was still off-limits to all of Govicide. He'd already strayed out of bounds once. Even sitting at this computer was a lot closer than the Director wanted.

And Locke remembered another reason he shouldn't confront Hamilton. Hamilton was unbreakable. He'd talk only if he wanted to, no one could force him.

This was the entire reason the Director allowed Locke to interrogate the murderer in the first place. The Director didn't want any of his own Agents to fail. Locke's teeth tapped like hammers as he dwelled on being set up as a decoy.

The light from the monitor illuminated a quarter of the office. His large shadow stretched across the floor, desks, and two chairs. He concentrated on it.

The soft voice of temptation grew louder telling him he could confront Hamilton again, but without the Govicide Director watching. He could face the murderer as a Govicide Agent not a Homicide Detective. And he wouldn't leave until he got answers.

Locke rose to his feet, eyeing the door leading to the prison. Did he dare? Finally, he strode forward, grabbing the handle before he could change his mind.

Following the same path as a few days ago, he convinced himself he'd stay there all night if needed.

The Guard on duty wasn't Ned, who worked during the day. Locke didn't know this male well.

Slouching, the Security Guard straightened when he heard the footsteps. He'd been flipping through an issue of OWG Week. When he saw Locke approaching, clad in black, the Guard fixed his tie and put the magazine under his desk.

"Relax, don't worry about it," Locke said as he approached.

"Detective Locke? I heard you--"

"Became an Agent a few days ago?"

The Guard stood, then bowed. "I thought it was a lie. Nobody ever--"

"I told you to relax." Locke patted the Guard on his shoulder. "I want to see Hamilton."

The Guard squinted, examining Locke. "Uh, sir. Govicide Agent Locke, no Govicide authorities are mandated to see Hamilton."

"I arrested him. I think that grants me some special privileges." Locke strolled to the cell bloc door.

"Govicide Agent Locke, you are putting me in a tough position here." The Guard's eyes drifted to the ceiling then down the corridor. Hands on his hips, his chest heaved. There was no better example of how subjects reacted in the face of Govicide pressure. Indecisiveness. Sweating. Stuttering. Second-guessing. All due to the power of the Department and the badge.

"Ned let me in a few days ago."

"That may be the case but . . ."

"Here's what you're going to do." Locke stepped over to the Guard. "You're going to pretend you never saw me."

"I could get in big trouble."

"You? How about me?" Locke laughed. Inside, he was frowning, trying to ignore the implications of what he was doing.

"And you are doing this behind the Director's back?" the Guard asked.

"There's no time to call the Director and explain. I'll get in more trouble if I don't get to talk to Hamilton immediately."

"Govicide Agent Locke . . ." The Guard's voice drifted and he backed away from the Agent, looking at the floor between them.

Locke tried a different tactic, one that would work if he were in this Guard's shoes. "I have a suspicion Goods and Services might be affected if I don't get to speak to Hamilton."

The Guard's eyes met Locke's. "Goods and Services?" His jaw dropped open.

"Yes. And I don't mean a year from now. Soon. Maybe even next week."

"Govicide Agent Locke, why did you not say that in the first place? Of course you can see Hamilton," the Guard answered. "Is there going to be any screaming involved?"

"No, no screaming," Locke answered. The Guard's question was valid, though. Screaming went along with torturing Offenders who threatened to block the delivery of Goods and Services.

The Guard unlocked the door. "Just making sure. I have heard the stories about Govicide. A comrade of mine got in some trouble with Govicide once. Once."

“There won’t be any screaming. Maybe yelling. But I’m not going to hurt him.”
Locke doubted he could even if he tried.

CHAPTER 21

Locke hustled down the corridor. No doubts about what he was about to do. No pauses to check out the prisoners in the other cells. No turning around to see if the Guard watched.

He walked with purpose yet he lacked a plan. Maybe Hamilton would reveal the plan to him. The killer left those U Symbols at each crime scene for a reason, wanting someone to see them. Surely he'd want to talk about them.

But, Hamilton must've thought Locke was an idiot when he didn't ask about them during the interrogation. No wonder the killer displayed nothing but strength.

One cell away, he had a flashback from two days ago. As before, murmurs emanated from Hamilton's cell. This time, Locke didn't slow down.

Hamilton sat in the middle of the cell, like before, pointed away from the cell door. His hands lay in his lap, his wide back straight as a post. His legs were pressed together, feet crossed in front of the chair. He didn't seem to sense Locke's presence.

" . . . If the outcome is so different from our aims—if, instead of freedom and prosperity, bondage and misery stare us in the face—is it not clear that sinister forces must have foiled our intentions, that we are the victims of some evil power which must be conquered before we can resume the road to better things?"

Locke listened and once again Hamilton's words confused him. It sounded like the OWG language but Hamilton put the words together in an odd fashion. Like before, Hamilton spoke with no hesitations. No pauses. No "uh's," "um's," "you know's," et cetera.

"That the present state of the world may be the result of genuine error on our own part and that the pursuit of some of our most cherished ideals has apparently produced results utterly different from those which we expected."

Locke rolled his eyes. He didn't have all night. "Hamilton . . . hey . . . Hamilton." He banged on the bars. "Turn around. I want to talk to you."

Hamilton ignored him. "That democratic socialism, the great utopia of the last few generations, is not only unachievable, but that to strive for it produces something so utterly different that few of those who now wish it would be prepared to accept the consequences, many will not believe until the connection has been laid bare in all its aspects." Hamilton stopped. Without turning, he spoke. "Detective Locke, how are you?"

Hamilton swung his knees to the side of his chair and turned. A sly smile appeared on his face upon noticing Locke's badge and black suit. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Locke felt like he was already on the defensive. Three words and Hamilton already had the advantage.

"Your suit. Your badge. You got recruited. That's a first for Govicide, isn't it?" Hamilton turned his chair 180 degrees to face Locke.

"It is a first. You know the history of Govicide?"

"I know a lot of history," Hamilton answered, flattening the front of his black jumpsuit.

"What were you reciting?" Locke folded his arms.

“Those words? Oh, they’re quotes from an important book I know.” Hamilton leaned forward putting his elbows on his knees, peering up at Locke.

“What book? I’ve never heard those words put together like that.”

“Of course you haven’t. It’s a book that doesn’t exist.”

Locke scratched his scalp then knotted his arms together again. “How can you recite words from a book that doesn’t exist?”

“You tell me.” Hamilton leaned back, crossing his arms and mirroring Locke.

There he went again, talking in riddles. A path Locke had no desire to follow. He pulled one of the bills out from his suit, making sure it was one with a pyramid. “We have a lot to talk about, Hamilton. Let’s start with this.”

Hamilton saw the bill, his eyes came alive, and he jumped from his chair, taking two steps toward the bars. “Cash!”

Locke stepped back, surprised at the emotion from the killer. He crumpled up the bill and threw it between the bars, landing at Hamilton’s feet. The killer picked the bill off the floor like it was a flower.

“Yes. Cash,” Locke replied.

Hamilton’s expression was a new one. It seemed like genuine joy. Hamilton held the bill up to the light in his cell, running his finger over each side. He flipped it around, admiring both sides.

“The Limbaugh Division.” Hamilton rolled the bill around in his hands. “I can tell by the texture.”

“The Limbaugh Division? What’s that?” Locke took a slow step toward the cell.

“Something else that doesn’t exist.” His eyes strayed over to Locke then returned to the bill.

Locke’s jaw clenched, almost locking in place. This was going nowhere. He needed a different direction. “I went through the pictures of your crime scenes.” He reached in another pocket, unfolding the letter and envelope from Dale City. He pressed them against the bars. “And I discovered this U at all of them.”

Freezing briefly, Hamilton stared at Locke’s presentation. “It only took you two years, Govicide Agent Locke,” Hamilton chuckled. After a moment, he continued inspecting the bill.

“I never said I was the smartest subject. What does this U mean?” Locke shook the envelope.

The shaking had its intended effect. Hamilton’s gaze drifted to the envelope, then the letter. He squinted but the writing was too far away for him to read.

“It does mean something.” Hamilton’s eyes narrowed. “But that’s not a U.” His attention returned to the cash.

“It’s not? Then what is it?” Locke turned the envelope around, taking another glance at the U.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. It’s something. But for us it’s a Symbol. A reminder.” Finished with his scrutiny of the bill, Hamilton’s hands returned to his sides.

“A Symbol of what? A reminder of what?” Locke felt his forehead getting hot. He almost pressed his face between the bars.

“It’s a reminder of what doesn’t exist.” Hamilton retreated to his chair, kicking his feet out in front and lounging back.

Locke slapped the bars with the envelope. "All this doesn't exist stuff. You think it's funny, don't you? This isn't a joke. If you give me some straight answers I can make things easier for you."

"First, Detec . . . sorry . . . Govicide Agent Locke. You don't have to do anything for me. I'll manage. Second, as far as this doesn't exist stuff . . ." Hamilton took a long pause. ". . . there are certain things that exist to me but not to you. However, I'm in your world, of your making. So, I frame it in your terms."

Locke grimaced. This murderer was crazier than he thought. Something either existed or it didn't.

"Well, this U exists in both my world and your world." Locke grasped to pull his ideas together into something coherent. "It's here. It's on this envelope. You put one at every crime scene. It was etched into a padlock I saw out in the middle of nowhere near Cornville--"

Hamilton interrupted, "You've been out there?"

"Yes, I've been there. So, this U exists. Will you tell me what it is?"

"I told you. It's a Symbol for us." The words came out quieter, like Hamilton feared the walls would hear.

"Us? And who are you?"

"Isn't it clear? Wow, that OWG education of yours is worse than I thought." Hamilton cackled.

"Who are you?" If Locke could have, he'd have reached out and banged Hamilton against the bars. His fear of Hamilton vanished like some convicted Offenders.

"I'm what the OWG fears." Hamilton's eyes returned to black, zeroing in on Locke's.

Locke shrugged it off. "The OWG fears nothing. Who are you?"

The killer shook his head. "Govicide Agent Locke, I'm a Free Enterpriser. What did you think?"

At first, he thought Hamilton was joking. His body reacted with indifference. The last statement was the ranting of a killer. Another ploy to make Locke doubt himself. Hamilton hadn't given a straight answer since they met. Why would he be honest now? He was trying to prey upon the fears every subject in the World possessed--That a bunch of subjects were going to come and take everything away.

And, after all, Free Enterprisers weren't real.

While Locke let Hamilton's answer roll around his brain, he watched the murderer. He showed no outward signs of lying. No darting eyes or fidgeting. No blinking. No heavy breathing.

Down the prison hallway, silence dominated. Maybe the other prisoners were listening. Did they know who Hamilton was? Had he shouted something to them when no one was around? They probably knew more about Hamilton than Locke did.

But Locke decided he'd give it another shot.

"A Free Enterpriser?" Locke forced a laugh, spinning in place. "You certainly do have delusions, don't you? You're just a killer. A killer with a bunch of Offenders who are moving cash. That's all. This U could mean anything. But probably nothing."

"You know about the moving of the cash?" Hamilton nodded, sticking out his lower lip. He didn't seem bothered by the revelation.

Locke jammed the letter and envelope into his pocket. "Yeah, we figured it out. At the time, I thought you killed those Agents just for fun. But now Govicide Agent Hiss tells me there was a cash warehouse in every city where you murdered an Agent. Surely not a coincidence."

The killer pointed at the Agent, a smile in his eyes. "You're right. So, you're partnered with Hiss? Unruly fellow, isn't he? Goes off without thinking first. Nasty guy. A true, true believer in the OWG." Hamilton retracted his legs, resting his elbows on his knees again.

"I'm not going to talk about my partner unless it's about Govicide work." An image of Ames crushed head flashed in his mind, souring his stomach. He kept a smile pasted on his face. No good would come from showing weakness in front of Hamilton.

"Hiss doesn't know you're here, does he?" Hamilton's head cocked to one side, his chin rose a few degrees.

Hamilton was kept in the dark about Govicide authorities being prohibited from seeing him. And Locke wouldn't inform him. "He can't stand the sight or thought of you. Especially since you killed his partner."

The murderer shrugged. "Had to be done. Tell Hiss it was just business."

"Business? I've never heard the word. What does it mean?" His question brought Locke closer to the bars again.

The killer smiled, showing enough of his perfect teeth to make Locke jealous. "Don't get angry but it's another word that doesn't exist."

"That again . . ." Locke bent his head back, closing his eyes. Like the interrogation, Hamilton seemed to have the upper hand. Locke couldn't figure out a way inside Hamilton's head. He opened his eyes to see Hamilton approaching the cell bars, stopping an arm's length away.

Don't backup, Locke told himself. Stand firm.

"Okay, Govicide Agent Locke. I'll help you with that one. Business means work, kind of." Hamilton tilted his head to the left and right. "It's like when you get credits from the OWG."

"Oh, I get it. I'm entitled to them because I work for the glory of the OWG. That's business?"

Hamilton scrunched his face. "Uh . . . not really, but close enough." Hamilton grabbed a bar with his left hand, keeping the bill of cash in his other fist.

"So," Locke felt like backing up, but his feet remained glued to the concrete, "you murdered those Agents because you had to. You did it because it was work for the glory of something? So what kind of work is that? Where did the cash go? Who could use all that cash?"

"Somebody who needs something that can't be obtained with your OWG credits. That's who."

"But OWG credits can get anything. Everything the OWG makes. Goods and Services, everything."

Hamilton backed away, circling to the rear of his cell. "That's true. But credits cannot get something the OWG didn't make."

"But the OWG makes everything," Locke shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his legs tiring from Hamilton's maze of thoughts.

“Govicide Agent Locke, you’re already angry with my exist but doesn’t exist phrases so I don’t want to say it again.” The killer leaned against the back wall.

“But what does that mean? How can something exist but not exist?” Locke gripped the bar where Hamilton had before.

“There are questions I can’t answer. Let’s just say a Free Enterpriser would need a large amount of cash.” Hamilton folded and unfolded the bill, playing with it as if it were a toy.

He’d listened to Hamilton’s utter nonsense. Now, it was Hamilton’s turn to listen to truth. “You keep bringing up that Free Enterpriser thing. They don’t exist. Little kid stories. That’s all.” A queasy feeling twisted his gut. “The stories are told to make sure everyone realizes what happens if the OWG ever collapsed. The Free Enterprisers are the opposite of the OWG. The OWG is the ultimate provider and Free Enterprisers are the ultimate takers. And although there may be some Offenders like you, no one has the ability or the desire to truly take down the entire System. The OWG is too perfect at what it does.”

“The OWG is perfect? That’s certainly one interpretation.” Hamilton folded the bill into a paper plane and threw it at Locke. It crashed at the Agent’s feet.

Locke thrust out his chest not bothering to pick up the paper airplane. “The OWG provides all the necessities of life. Water, food, healthcare, transportation, reading material, entertainment, clothes. Nobody needs anything. This allows subjects to live fulfilling lives.”

Hamilton’s chin dipped down, his brow pointing at Locke. “And Govicide Agent Locke, what if I told you there was another way to live that was better?”

Locke shook his head. “Talk about something that doesn’t exist . . .”

“I understand. But, hypothetically, what if I told you there was a world where an OWG provided nothing?” Hamilton, smooth as a tabletop, strolled forward to his chair.

“Nothing?”

“Yes. Nothing.” Hamilton circled his chair once, pausing to eye Locke. Then he continued his lazy orbits.

“That’s hard to imagine because without an OWG providing everything subjects would die. You’re asking me to imagine something that’s impossible. It could never happen,” Locke’s back stiffened, his mind as well. “That’s why the Free Enterpriser idea is so dangerous. Without the OWG providing everything, the world would descend into chaos. Then, there would be no World. No civilization. No life.”

Hamilton stopped, hands on the back of the chair. “And what if I told you at one time a civilization existed that was the opposite of the OWG?”

Locke’s slapped the bars, hurting his fingers, but anger defeated the pain. “Before the OWG, there was nothing but chaos. You’re lying.”

Hamilton pushed the wooden chair out of his way, the legs screeching. “I’ve never lied to you, Govicide Agent Locke.” Hamilton took a step toward Locke. “I know. You think I talk in riddles.” Another step. Locke felt himself wanting to retreat. “How can things exist and not exist at the same time. The Pyramids. The U is not a letter but something else. All of it.” A step. “I’ve always told you the truth. Why? Because I want to.” Another step. “I never claimed I didn’t kill those Agents. I never claimed I did it because I lost my mind.” One more step. “I’ve always been honest. Why would I lie

now?” Hamilton plodded closer. “And why would I make such an outrageous assertion? I’ve already murdered fourteen Agents. You can’t get much more outrageous than that.”

He stopped within arm’s length of Locke. One quick move and Hamilton could’ve pinned him up against the cell bars.

Yet, Locke felt no specter of fear. No, that wasn’t correct. He felt it. But it wasn’t from Hamilton’s presence. The fear came from his words. What if Hamilton was really telling the truth?

Now *that* was crazy.

“You’re just a killer,” Locke uttered, staring at Hamilton. Neither male blinked.

“I’m more than that, Govicide Agent Locke.” Hamilton bent over and picked up the paper airplane just inside the cell. He held it up. “This cash and the Symbol prove it.”

Hamilton’s was so close Locke could smell his breath. He expected it to stink. Instead, it smelled fresh, like he’d been chewing gum.

Hamilton stepped away from the bars. A sly smile formed on his face. “Tell me. Your doctors did all those tests on me. Examined me. Poked me. Prodded me with their OWG Instruments. And I’m sure you’ve read my file. Tell me about my teeth.” Hamilton showed his teeth for effect.

What a strange request. However, after remembering what he had thought about Hamilton’s teeth--the murderer’s entire physical condition for that matter, Locke could see the logical end to the topic.

However, the word, “teeth,” also caused Locke to think the word linked to something unrelated to Hamilton.

Hamilton must have sensed Locke’s hesitation. “Go ahead. I know what condition they are in. You can say it.”

“They’re perfect, according to our OWG Doctors,” Locke answered, the words finding their way between his own clenched teeth.

“How perfect are they?” Hamilton slid his chair back to the center.

“They’re the most perfect teeth the doctors have seen.” Locke’s gaze fell to the area just in front of Hamilton. He knew where this was going.

Hamilton sat down. “So, I ask you: If the OWG is the perfect provider of Goods and Services. And its healthcare is perfect. How can there be no record of me ever being in the System, yet I have better teeth than anyone. Even better than the Director himself?”

Locke tried to answer this question a few days ago. He had no answer then and he had no answer now. “You must have cheated.” He still couldn’t look right at Hamilton. “Subjects do it all the time.”

“For thirty years? C’mon, Govicide Agent Locke.” Hamilton flicked his hand in Locke’s direction as if a fly was buzzing around him.

“You got lucky.” Locke heard his words, remembering his interview with the Director.

“Lucky? You can’t imagine any other way besides the OWG, can you? You can’t because you only have one idea in your head and it’s wrong. I would think a person with the last name, Locke, would be smarter.”

Locke had forgotten all about that cryptic statement from the interrogation. It got buried by the talk of rights and pyramids.

“What does that mean? You know someone with my name?” Locke pressed his face against the bars.

“I know a lot about a guy named Locke. But, you know what? He doesn’t exist.” Hamilton raised his eyebrows, smiling once again.

Locke threw his hands up in the air. “That again?” Why did he even bother with this male?

“I’m sorry, Govicide Agent Locke, but you have to understand something. I can’t teach you about topics if you deny they exist. There is no reason for me to waste my time.” Hamilton unfolded the paper plane.

“But you’ll waste your time trying to take Goods and Services from subjects with your cash?” Locke scoffed. “You and your little gang want to overthrow the OWG for your own ends so the Goods and Services will cease and everyone will die.”

“Well, there’s no doubt Goods and Services from the OWG would come to a halt. But you’d be surprised . . .” Hamilton’s voice trailed off.

“Surprised about what?” Locke heard his voice cracking, a sure sign this conversation with Hamilton was a failure.

“I’ve said enough. Are we finished here? Anything else?” Hamilton puts his arms out to his sides as he asked, stretching.

Locke tramped away, talking over his shoulder. “You’re no Free Enterpriser. We’ll catch the rest of your comrades.” Locke tried his best to sound nasty, but the doubts Hamilton’s words stirred up kept his tone as plain as a sheet of paper. “We’ll find that cash. We’ll throw all of you in prison. And you’ll be nothing but a footnote in the history of Govicide.”

“And maybe, just maybe, I’ll be written out of OWG history altogether?”

Locke didn’t respond. He wanted to say something smart, but “written out of OWG history altogether” had him stymied. The phrase struck a note in his mind, as if it answered a question he’d long been asking. But, he couldn’t remember the question. However, it caused him to stop in his tracks.

Hamilton continued, “I couldn’t help but notice, Govicide Agent Locke, your letter said something about your girlfriend, I mean, girlcomrade being pregnant. Is that true?”

Had his back not been tense from the last few seconds of conversation, Locke would have bent over as if Hiss punched him in the stomach again. How could he have been so stupid to show Hamilton the letter? And he’d only displayed it for a few seconds.

“I will take from your non-response that it’s true.” Hamilton paused. “And yes, my eyes are as in good a shape as my teeth. Well, like the letter says, congratulations. Children are a tremendous gift. I have children myself.” Locke still had his back turned and couldn’t see Hamilton. He didn’t want the killer to see his worried face. “But I understand why you’re here. It’s not all about the cash, is it? Sure, you want to know why I mentioned the Pyramids. And rights, of course you want to know about that. But you’re here because the U . . . that’s what you call it . . . was on the envelope that contained the letter about your girlcomrade’s pregnancy. That’s why you showed it to me first.”

Locke took a long, slow breath then crept back to Hamilton’s cell, reeling from the sudden twist in their conversation.

“Why did they give you the letter?” Hamilton stood and met Locke at the bars.

“You tell me, Hamilton. They’re your comrades.” If Hamilton knew the full extent of Locke’s predicament, it could cause problems.

“I have no idea. I’m in here and I don’t get much news.” Hamilton shifted from one foot to the other. “Why did they give you that letter? Hmmm, probably because they are

genuinely happy to hear the news. How did they find out about it?" Hamilton's face had an expression of genuine care. His voice, too. Or was Locke imagining it?

Locke sidestepped the question. "They're going to use it to blackmail me, aren't they?"

"Why would they . . ." Hamilton's jaw dropped. "Oh, now I get it. Govicide doesn't know. An un-mandated pregnancy during non-sex credit sex?"

Locke nodded, still not believing his huge mistake. Well, both mistakes. Getting Jade pregnant *and* allowing Hamilton to find out about it.

"I see. . . What are you going to do?" Hamilton asked, his voice soft like an OWG Counselor.

"I don't know. I'll figure something out. But your comrades will blackmail me first," Locke leered.

"Blackmail? Not our style. Especially when pregnant women and kids are concerned." Hamilton closed his eyes and shook his head as if the mere thought repulsed him.

Was this an act by Hamilton? For the first time, he suddenly seemed almost human.

"Not your style? You murdered fourteen Govicide Agents. What's a little blackmail mixed in?" Locke laughed.

"Not one of those Agents had kids. Check it out. Kids need their parents, no matter what the OWG says," Hamilton responded, pointing at Locke.

Locke did a mental calculation. At least seven of the dead Agents didn't have children but he wasn't sure about the rest. Could Hamilton be telling the truth?

"I'll have to get back to you on that," Locke answered. What was he going to do now that Hamilton knew the pregnancy secret now? He corrected himself: It wasn't a secret anymore, not when this many subjects knew about it.

"You know, Locke," Hamilton for some reason left off Locke's official title, "there was a time when subjects were allowed to have sex when they wanted. No credits. No un-mandated pregnancies. The authorities had no idea what people were doing in their sex lives."

"You mean in between beating each other's brains out providing for themselves with Goods and Services?" Let Hamilton try to get out of that one.

"Joke if you want. But it's true." Hamilton shrugged.

"Yeah, whatever, Hamilton." Locke turned away again. "I think I've had enough of you for today. I can only take so many lies. I thought we could work something out. You help me out. And I help you out."

"See? That's what you don't understand, Locke. I don't compromise. The reason I don't is because your way is evil."

"I'm not evil." Locke spun around, facing Hamilton.

"You're part of a system. Not the system, the invasive computer monitoring everyone. I'm talking about the entire thing put together. OWG, Govicide, the System, bar codes, scanners. It's all evil. And I can't compromise with evil."

"Pretty funny coming from someone who kills Agents providing everything for everyone. Who is evil exactly?"

Hamilton stepped toward the bars, the old version of himself returning. His face burned with anger. "No. You want to know what's evil? I'll tell you. There was a time when a Homicide was the worst crime. You murdered anyone and you went to jail for

many years, if not your life. Now, when a murderer takes somebody's life, unless the victim is a Govicide Agent, they get maybe five years, usually less. *That. . . is evil.*"

"A life sentence for murder? That must have been one crazy world." Locke twirled his finger around his ear.

"It's not so crazy when you believe in rights." Hamilton flinched like he hadn't meant to say it.

"There you go talking about rights again. What did you say? People . . . an unmandated word, I might add . . . have no rights when the OWG is never wrong? What does that mean?"

"It means not everything the OWG does is correct. There are rules it must follow if every person is to live as a human."

"But the only goal is to make sure the OWG is healthy so it can provide Goods and Services. And without Goods and Services we don't exist." Locke threw his arms out to his sides. "So any OWG mandate is just. Any subject who gets in the way is unjust. Because without the OWG, we'd all be dead."

They stood nose to nose, the bars separating them as if they were caged animals.

"Don't you get it, Locke? If you are expendable at the whim of an OWG mandate no matter what it is, you're . . . already . . . dead. You just haven't gotten in its way yet."

"And I won't." Locke's voice echoed off the cement walls.

Hamilton allowed the reverberations to ease and replied in a whisper. "Well, I believe in a place where an authority can't do anything it wants, where it can only do very little. Where no person, no subject, gets in the way. Where mandates, if that's what you want to call them, don't get people killed for simply being alive. *Think . . . about . . . that.*"

Like the quickness of OWG justice, Hamilton's right hand shot between the bars and grabbed Locke's suit.

"Hey . . ." Locke tried to pull away but Hamilton's grip was a vise. Out of every pore came the sweat of death. He'd allowed his defenses to slacken and this killer took advantage. Locke tried to kick Hamilton but the bars deflected his feet. Both of his hands grabbed Hamilton's but they couldn't unlatch it.

He tried to snake out of his jacket but Hamilton had a hold of his shirt underneath as well. Locke was about to yell out to the Guard when--

"Govicide Agent Locke, relax. Just wanted to give this back to you." Hamilton placed the bill of cash back in Locke's hand. But it was not in the shape of a plane like Hamilton created before. Nor was it flattened out in its original form.

It was in the form of an S with a line through it. Hamilton released Locke and backed away, sitting down in his chair.

Locke examined the bill, him rotating it 360 degrees. "How did you make this?"

"I have a lot of time on my hands," Hamilton crossed his legs.

A few more seconds of checking Hamilton's work and Locke put the bill back in his pocket. "Uh-huh. Well, that's nice, but I still don't trust you."

Spinning away, Locke retraced a few of his steps down the corridor. He heard scuffling behind him. Turning around, he saw Hamilton's nose sticking out between the bars.

"You really want to trust me?" Hamilton's voice had just a tinge of disbelief.

“Yeah, I really do.” Locke felt the genuineness of the sentence sweep over him, warm and soothing.

“Turn your world upside down and you’ll see the U everywhere,” Hamilton disappeared back into his cell.

“Pathetic,” Locke said under his breath. Hamilton fooled him again.

This time was no different than the first. No straight answers. Paradoxes. Games. Puzzles. The rewriting of history. Distinguishing lies from the truth was tough with so much misdirection.

If there was any truth at all to anything Hamilton said.

But, as Locke approached the first bloc door, the craziest of thoughts nagged at him no matter how many times he flicked it away.

What if it was all truth?

CHAPTER 22

Closing the Hamilton files on the Homicide computer, Locke hit the keys hard, trying to smash them down through the bottom of the keyboard. Not only had he gotten no new information, now Hamilton knew about Jade's pregnancy. And it wasn't even through Hamilton's guile. Locke made it easy by giving him the information outright. He was fortunate the Director disallowed Govicide Agents to see Hamilton. So, the information wouldn't be passed on.

Unless an Agent cheated like he just did.

Or worse, what if Hamilton requested to see an Agent, realizing he could use Jade's un-mandated pregnancy to get some leniency?

He hesitated at his keyboard pounding, expecting his stomach to start churning at any second. But it remained still and silent.

No. Something told him the killer wouldn't voluntarily tell on Locke. He'd do it under torture—how could he not?

But, on his own accord without pressure? Hamilton insisted he wouldn't compromise to the OWG. Telling on Locke would be a compromise—a way to gain favor with Govicide.

Instead, knowing the killer the way he did, he believed Hamilton's own beliefs and hatred for the OWG would give Locke all the cover he needed for now. As long as Govicide was unmandated to be in Hamilton's presence, Locke would be fine. However, if the torture started, Locke's luck would run out.

But, he saw the paradox: The beliefs Locke hated the most were now the ones that would keep Hamilton's mouth shut.

The System would register someone accessed Hamilton's files. But it shouldn't raise a red flag. Or even a yellow flag. The System stored the information the same as a Service being used according to a mandate. If one of the System Controllers were motivated, he'd find the record of the file usage. Otherwise, the breach would go right under the System's nose.

Outside, in his automobile, he ruminated on how, once again, Hamilton had gotten the best of him. He wondered what might happen if the Director was in the same room with Hamilton. Would the killer get the best of the Director as well?

Not possible.

Or was it?

He noticed the passenger's seat where he set the envelope and letter. The words howled at him. The Symbol—what did Hamilton call it?—on the envelope taunted him, its secret in plain view but undecipherable.

What had Hamilton said at the end? Something about turning the world upside down and Locke would see the U everywhere?

How was he supposed to turn the world upside down? It was impossible. He could stand on his head but for only so long.

Thinking for a moment, he watched an OWG bus go by.

An idea came to him. If he were upside down, the U wouldn't be a U anymore. It would be a bump. Or a hill. Or a mountain.

Picking up the envelope, he turned it upside down.

And what did Hamilton say? When the world was upside down, he'd see the U everywhere.

Everywhere?

Locke roamed these streets for thirty years and never saw what Hamilton mentioned. So, how could the killer mean "everywhere"?

He must have meant in those other cities where the cash disappeared. In Dale City or Cornville or Red Star City. Cash had disappeared in Gambling City too but Locke knew these streets. He would've seen the Symbol by this time.

He gripped the key, ready to start the automobile, when a thought froze him. If the U was upside down, then it wasn't a letter at all. Thus, a word wouldn't solve the mystery. And the time he spent on the computer going through all those U words meant nothing. He banged the steering wheel.

Hoping he wasn't wasting his time again, he started the automobile, setting out to find any upside down U's in the city.

The best place to start would be in the area of the warehouse Hiss showed him. If the Symbol wasn't there, it wouldn't be anywhere. Locke made a left at the next block, figuring out how to turn the high beams on in the process.

Locke pulled up to the warehouse. He hadn't seen one upside down U during his trip. Maybe he took Hamilton's word, "everywhere," a little too literally.

He got out of his car, leaving it running at the curb. He left the high beams on.

Locke walked down the street, examining the outside of the warehouse. There was no upside down U's there. How big would one of them be? A foot high? Six inches? Two feet?

For several minutes, Locke searched the area. Light poles. Telephone poles. The sidewalk. Nearby walls.

If there were any upside down U's, they'd be around this building. But he saw none.

Upon returning to his automobile, he kicked the front left tire. The pain darted from his big toe up through his ankle into his shin. He slapped the hood, yelling.

Slamming the door of the automobile, he sat in silence for a few seconds. When his anger peaked again, he punched the dash three times in quick succession. He screamed, hating himself for believing Hamilton. If a killer hated Agents enough to murder them, then he'd never tell one of them any truth.

Hamilton--Free Enterpriser or not--hated the OWG for whatever reason and would say anything to corrode anyone's belief in it. The OWG way was the only way. The only way that made sense. The only way that could work.

Shaking his hand to dissipate the pain, he put the automobile into drive with his right hand and did a u-turn in the street, the high beams passing over the front of the warehouse.

And there it was.

It had been in front of him the whole time. But it was bigger than he expected. A lot bigger.

Spray painted over the entire front of the warehouse was an upside down U. Each end started at on the sidewalk, forty feet apart. The top reached a point just a foot below the roof's peak and curved back down. Painted black, it resembled an archway.

Locke punched the dash again. This time with excitement, not caring about the pain.

He jumped out, leaving the automobile parked sideways in the street so the high beams stayed on the Symbol. He replayed how he'd missed the gigantic Symbol days before, running through a mental checklist. It was daytime. Hiss had been to the warehouse many times before and knew the building well. They stood outside the warehouse for at least a minute.

With all those reasons, they should have noticed the large Symbol on the front. They wouldn't have realized its significance, but it should have caught their attention.

On the other hand, the Symbol could have been painted in the past few days after he and Hiss left. Locke jogged to where the left side of the upside down U almost touched the sidewalk. He stood to one side so his shadow wouldn't block the light.

The paint didn't look fresh, though he wasn't an expert. Scoured by the desert wind, the paint had been all but sandblasted off in places.

After surveying part of the Symbol for a few minutes, Locke deduced it had been there months, if not longer. He kicked the metal wall, frustrated with himself for missing something so obvious. But, it was at least a small verification Hamilton had told the truth.

Were there more?

He examined the buildings to the left and right. Nothing.

He leaned against the passenger's side door to think, tapping his foot. There was probably a Symbol or two on in the inside of the warehouse as well. But, he didn't have a flashlight with him. He'd have to wait until daylight.

An OWG bus passed, missing his automobile by a few feet. Locke checked the bus for the Symbol but didn't see one.

Locke knew much of Gambling City like the back of his hand. He'd grown up here. Had gone to OWG School here. In fact, until the Hamilton murders, he'd been out of the area only twice. He closed his eyes and visualized a trip around his town. He hoped some memory of a street or landmark would point him in the best direction.

In his mind, he traveled Gambling Boulevard to Collective Way. He made a right. He glided three blocks and made a left on Altruism Road. He traveled four stoplights and made a right on Bureaucrat Lane. None of these places seemed like the kind of location one of these Symbols would be found. Sure, Hamilton said they'd be found everywhere but Locke didn't want to drive around all night.

There had to be a best place to find one. But where?

The location of the Hamilton's first murder.

It occurred right outside an old abandoned airport, used before the OWG built the current one.

Locke sped his automobile down Gambling Boulevard. After five minutes, he made a left on Entitlement Drive, scanning for the Symbols. With no subject on the sidewalks, and very few buses on the streets, nothing obstructed his view. Many of the streetlights were out, so he relied on the headlights. If the Symbols were black like the other one, he could easily miss them.

After several blocks, he stopped at an intersection. On the nearest corner sat a fueling station for buses and transportation of the local OWG authorities. On the far corner was

an OWG book store that dispersed all the new OWG publications. A blinking yellow light signaled caution to approaching vehicles.

Having been through this intersection many times, he blinked twice when he saw something on a road sign on the far side. As he got closer, he hugged to the curb of the road so his headlights shone on it. He slowed to a crawl when it came into view.

The Symbol.

The sign wasn't large, so the Symbol wasn't either. About a foot high and ten inches wide. The upside down U covered most of the surface area.

Slapping the steering wheel, Locke couldn't stifle a laugh. Hamilton had told the truth.

He exited to investigate further, slamming the door shut, still smiling.

Yet, his somersaulting insides told him he shouldn't be so giddy. They reminded him: Hamilton told him the truth . . . uh-oh. If he told the truth about the Symbol, then maybe everything else he said might be true as well.

One point at a time, Locke told himself.

The sign stood about six and a half feet high, forcing him to crane his neck. He reached up and touched it. This Symbol looked like the large one on the warehouse. Black but faded. He admired the work for a few seconds and then surveyed the surrounding buildings. The odds of someone noticing a subject spray-painting this sign were low. In fact, it was minutes after eight o'clock and the streets were empty. Locke could see OWG workers waiting for subjects at the bookstore and gas store.

The whole area looked . . . dead.

He remembered having the feeling before but couldn't place it.

Up the street were empty OWG buildings, built for the day when subjects would populate them. He noticed the large parking lots for automobiles. Somewhere inside his head—maybe it was just a dream, Locke remembered as a kid seeing more automobiles on the road than there were now.

No, he must be imagining it. The OWG insisted the present was better than the past. And the future would be better than the present. And the way it was to happen was for the Masses to work for the OWG. Harder. Faster. Longer. Even if that meant less monthly credits so the OWG could be more secure.

Yes, there were more vehicles now than in the past.

Seeing movement in the nearby OWG Book Repository gave Locke an idea. Maybe the worker inside saw somebody hanging around the sign in the last few days. Or weeks. Or months. Someone who appeared out of place. A subject carrying a spray can wasn't an everyday occurrence.

A minute later, Locke entered the building. Everything a subject needed to know about the OWG could be found here. And the books were relatively new. The OWG burned any book older than ten years to keep the current publications fresh and interesting. This kept workers busy re-stocking shelves.

He estimated there were at least five of these around town. Subjects came here to pick up their other required reading material since it was too much work for the OWG to deliver all required information. The only book that got delivered, without error, was the OWG Manual. The System kept track of what every subject read and sent out messages if subjects got behind in their mandatory reading. Each book—hardbacks, paperbacks, and pamphlets—could be gotten for about a half-month's worth of credits.

The old female in the aisle limped from shelf to shelf, stocking books, some too heavy for her to carry more than one at a time. It seemed she hadn't heard the door open. He approached her from behind in aisle number three.

"Book worker." He tapped her on the shoulder.

"Oh, my . . ." Her hand came to her chest as she dropped a thick hardback. It crashed to the floor. "You scared me . . ." She noticed the badge and his black suit. "Govicide Agent, I am sorry. I did not hear you come in." She bowed.

"It's okay, book worker." For a moment, he realized how easy subjects could enter, take their books, and exit without depositing any credits if she was this deaf. He'd pass the information along. "I have some questions for you."

"Please, anything for Govicide," she steadied herself by grabbing a shelf. "It would be such a pleasure to help. Anything I can do."

"The bus stop out there," he pointed. "Have you noticed anyone hanging around there? Kind of suspicious-like?"

"That bus stop? The bus stop I get off at every day? Suspicious? You mean like an Offender?"

He noticed a wheeze in her voice. Most likely a lung ailment. At her age, the OWG wouldn't help her. Very soon, it would make her expire.

"Possibly."

"Really? I had no idea there were any Offenders around here. If I knew, Govicide Agent, I would turn them in. I know how to be a good subject of the Masses," she nodded.

"I'm sure you do. But have you seen any one?"

"No. Nobody suspicious. Will I be in trouble?" One side of her face clenched, recoiling.

"No, not this time." He patted her bony shoulder. "How about the spray painting on the bus stop sign? How long has it been there?"

Her gaze moved past him and out the front window. "Spray painting? I never noticed that."

Locke didn't feel so bad now not having noticed the one on the warehouse.

"Well, it's on there. Looks to have been there for days, if not weeks."

"Huh. No. That cannot be." She must have remembered who stood in front of her because her eyes darted around and she twisted her hands. "But, I mean, you are Govicide. And you are always right. I guess I was not giving it attention. I promise to the OWG to do better next time."

There won't be a next time for you. The more he talked to her, the more he knew this was true. The OWG would make sure of that.

"Of course, you do. But you're sure? I'm not angry with you. I just need the truth. You haven't seen it?"

"No. And I am sorry."

"I know you are. Thanks." He motioned to leave, then stopped. "Let me get that for you."

Locke picked up the thick book she'd dropped and placed it on the shelf.

Outside, he stopped on the sidewalk, scratching his head. This female never noticed the Symbol on the sign. Same stop. Every day. And it never caught her eye. That was even harder to believe than Locke missing the one on the warehouse.

What was wrong with her?

The scary part? If he asked the next hundred subjects who got off at that stop, he didn't think they'd claim to have noticed the Symbol on the sign either.

What was wrong with them?

What was going on?

CHAPTER 23

Slamming the automobile into drive, Locke pulled onto the street and continued his quest to see more Symbols. He drove for a half hour without seeing any stray marks. He passed a couple of OWG parks. An OWG electrical power station. An OWG garbage dump.

Nothing.

Then, as though he had loosened his own blindfold, the Symbols started to stick out. On a concrete culvert. A cracked sidewalk. Street signs like the one at the bus stop. A grating covering the Gambling City sewage system. A brick wall of an empty building. A few etched into trees lining the streets. In one block, Locke saw the Symbol ten times. And those were the ones he could see from his automobile at night. Who knew how many he would see in the sunlight?

Hamilton told the truth. And, once again, the exclamation followed: Uh-oh.

His chills started at the gas pedal and snaked their way up his right leg. A few minutes later, his hands and legs shook with each passing Symbol. When his teeth started chattering, he turned the heater on. Within two minutes, the sweating and chattering rattled him enough to search for a place to pull off in a parking lot halfway between his living quarters and Homicide.

A large group of subjects would have been needed to draw all of them. They were everywhere, like Gambling City had a plague. The Symbols were a virus consuming the city. And nobody appeared to notice. Including him.

Locke berated himself for being oblivious when he was in Dale City and Cornville. Surely the Symbols were in those cities as well.

The Director needed to know about this. Locke would have to spin a few lies to make the story work. But, this was too important. The OWG must be protected from Hamilton and his Symbol-creating comrades. This was more than just cash and dead Agents now. Somehow they were able to paint all of these with no one noticing, even after the fact.

An OWG bus approached. Its drone drew his attention away from his thoughts for a moment. As it groaned by, Locke watched the subjects inside. It was half-full, more males than females. And not one of them looked up.

They kept their heads down. Their eyes were open—no one was sleeping. A couple of them shifted in their seats. But none of them gave one bit of attention to each other or the passing night.

Why had he never noticed this?

Still shivering, he came to a somewhat disturbing conclusion: The reason he hadn't noticed was, until recently, he had his head down as well. In fact, the more he thought about it, he never gazed out the windows of a bus either until his trip home after the Hamilton interrogation when he noticed the casinos.

Was this a coincidence or something more?

It was no wonder these Symbols managed to spread without anyone noticing. Sure, subjects walked the streets, but not as far as the buses traveled. These walkers saw a

couple of the Symbols and didn't think anything of it. It would be the subjects who traveled long distances who ought to see how many Symbols there were. But if everyone acted like these passengers, then nobody had the hope of seeing anything.

It made him shiver more, and now it felt like his brain rattled too. He turned the heater to high.

He wanted to pull out to see more Symbols but changed his mind. He'd wait for the next bus, deciding to compare passengers.

Until then, he allowed his flustered mind to return to the Symbols. Hamilton said they signified something. It had to mean something important.

They selected something that reminded them why they were doing what they were doing. They picked something that reminded Hamilton why he was murdering fourteen Govicide Agents. They picked something that reminded the cash transporters why they risked their lives outside of Cornville and elsewhere. They picked something that caused everyone to think the same exact thought.

The Symbol reminded viewers why they opposed the OWG, the System, and Govicide.

Were they Offenders? Or could it be true: Could Hamilton and the others be mythical Free Enterprisers?

In the case of the Offenders Govicide caught and executed, they were subjects who followed the System but sometimes strayed. They got their food, health, housing, etc. from the OWG. But, they tried to trade tools with a comrade. They gave leftovers to someone who wasn't managing his food well. They printed rudimentary forms of cash, not like the expert work Locke saw in Dale City. In essence, these subjects were fine with the OWG Goods and Services, but once in a while they stepped out of line and Govicide would reform them. Or get rid of them.

In the case of Free Enterprisers, though, the fables stated they were out to overthrow the OWG. They would destroy anything having to do with the OWG. They would dynamite the System and disband Govicide. Then, they'd wipe out all Goods and Services. In the end, there'd be nothing left but subjects and the world. No mandates. No leadership. No control. Nothing to eat. Nowhere to sleep. Chaos.

Who did Hamilton sound like?

It didn't take Locke more than a few seconds to answer: Hamilton was a Free Enterpriser. He'd already killed fourteen Govicide Agents. Was this not a way of disbanding Govicide?

He'd helped in the circulation of a massive amount of cash. Was this not a way of destroying the System?

He'd gotten his own healthcare, food, clothing, and transportation. Was this not a way of wiping out the OWG?

Hamilton was a Free Enterpriser.

They existed.

On the passenger seat, his satellite phone rang. It could be only one of two subjects. One the OWG allowed him to love and the other it forced him to like.

It was Jade. His shoulders slouched in relief.

"Yes, Jade."

"Where are you? I expected you home by now." Concern and exasperation fought for control in her tone.

He clenched his teeth so she wouldn't hear his Free Enterpriser fears. "I know you did. I lost track of the time. I'll be home in a little while. Checking something right now."

"You're okay?"

"I'm fine. Jump into bed and I'll be there before you know it."

"Okay. Bye."

He threw the phone on the seat. How would Jade handle the idea of Free Enterprisers existing? He wouldn't tell her right away. But what of the Masses? How would all the subjects of the Masses handle the idea of Free Enterprisers existing if they found out?

The first problem in all this was Hiss. He wouldn't believe Locke. The Agent already had the mindset that Hamilton was only a killer and the cash being moved was the regular operations of Offenders. These Symbols proved it was much more.

Hiss was like one of those passengers on the bus. He had his head down and kept to himself. In his case, his Govicide work. He was just getting on the bus at one stop and getting off at another, not noticing there were other things afoot.

But, there was something deeper. Hiss couldn't imagine someone wanting to rid the World of the OWG because it was perfect and had no flaws. No mistakes. No contradictions. No unanswered questions because the OWG was always right.

"People have no rights when the OWG is never wrong," Locke said aloud, interrupting his own thinking. His teeth stopped chattering. The automobile's heater had done its work.

Locke found himself in a paradox. What was a subject to do when the Free Enterpriser--Hamilton--was telling the truth while the OWG seemed to be withholding the truth?

What was the truth? The truth was that something about the OWG didn't seem . . . right.

That word again.

A familiar sound cracked his train of thought. Another bus came down the street. And like the last bus, this one passed and every passenger sat with his head lowered. No one looking out. No one talking to each other. No one concerned with anything outside the bus.

Locke craned his neck almost 180 degrees, watching the bus as long as possible. Still, he didn't see one subject look up, look out, or look at each other.

Why?

One male had the answers. And he was the one subject who hadn't lied to Locke yet. He was the one subject who made no excuses for anything he'd done.

Hamilton.

Locke put the car into drive. No clichés. No innuendos. No paradoxes. He was going to go back to the Homicide Prison to get answers.

He pulled out of the parking lot, going in the opposite direction of his living quarters. The tires squealed on the black pavement.

He wanted answers to the contradictions he saw. He wanted explanations for how Hamilton managed to live outside the System. He wanted Hamilton to tell him everything Locke didn't know about the World. Why were there so many buildings? Why were the streets so wide? Why were airports so large? Why didn't subjects notice the Symbols?

Hamilton would have explanations for everything.

And within the middle of this wave of intense curiosity another paradox came to him: He'd be asking Hamilton, a subject with seemingly no OWG education, to explain the World to him.

Locke made a right onto a deserted street. Five minutes to the Prison.

But Hamilton managed to turn the tables every time, only revealing what he wanted. Locke never got a feeling he'd tricked Hamilton into saying anything. All the words out of Hamilton's mouth were of his own choosing. This frustration caused Locke to drive faster, barely stopping at lights or stop signs.

As Locke wondered how to see Hamilton for the third time, he realized something: he wanted Hamilton to be a Free Enterpriser. The feeling startled him. His foot slipped off the gas.

How could he have such a terrible thought?

Searching his emotions, Locke snagged the answer. He hated how Offenders got around the System for days, even months, and then, when caught, said they were sorry and would never do it again. One day Offenders were trying everything to get around the System, then a week after they got caught they'd be turning in other Offenders for doing the same thing.

Not Hamilton. He was a true believer in opposing the OWG. He wouldn't turn in any of his partners. He would never assist the OWG in catching others.

Locke wanted to find at least one subject who opposed the OWG and was willing to die for what he believed. He wished someone could just say, "Yeah, I did it. The System sucks. The OWG sucks. Govicide sucks. I'm not sorry I did it. I'm only sorry I got caught."

Hamilton was that subject.

Locke came to rest at a stop sign, taking the time to rub his eyes. No one appeared on the streets but plenty of thoughts glided through his mind.

It was funny, believing in an idea. Sometimes the only way to tell if an idea was correct or not was the degree to which other subjects opposed it. When everybody thought alike, it wasn't a true indicator of whether the idea was valid.

Locke compared it to his relationship with Jade. He found that those topics on which they disagreed were the topics that had the biggest impact on their relationship. Those were the important topics. If Jade didn't care, the topic and the point of view didn't matter. The arguments she was willing to throw shoes over? Those were the times when the most communication took place.

Locke pulled up to Homicide again. If Offenders were competing with the OWG, then there was no competition at all. Locke wanted to see his pride and joy--the OWG, no matter if it told him the entire truth or not--overcome something big. Something proud of what it was. A real threat.

And the fact that Hamilton existed and got around the System, killed Govicide Agents, and was part of a large operation, made him the ultimate threat. The first real threat to the OWG. Locke couldn't wait for the OWG to rise up and crush Hamilton and his cronies. Locke couldn't wait to help.

In the meantime, Locke would exploit Hamilton.

In any way he could.

CHAPTER 24

Locke parked in the same space he occupied an hour and a half before. His hand gripped the door handle when his phone rang. He glanced at the display. It was Hiss.

“What does he want?” Locke pressed the answer button. “Hello, Govicide Agent Hiss.” He tried to sound happy to hear from his partner.

“Govicide Agent Locke, I received some new information. There is a site in the northeastern part of the Fourth Continent we should investigate.” The concern in his voice filtered through the phone.

“And . . .” The news caught Locke’s attention, but he was on a different mission.

“We depart in an hour. We must check it out immediately.”

No. Not now. Like a spring, Locke punched his window. His bony knuckles shuddered.

Calm down. “In an hour? Don’t we have Govicide Agents over there who can check it out?”

“Other Govicide Agents?” Hiss shouted. Locke thought Hiss’ hand might come through the phone and grab his throat. “You want some other team to get credit for this?”

“No.” *I don’t care*, he wished he could say I out loud.

“Then we will have to follow this case wherever it takes us. And I get the feeling there will be other leads coming. I have a bulletin out to every Govicide office around the World. If anyone discovers cash or our receiver stations detect any WPS signals, we will be notified since only you and I and the Director know about this other side of the Hamilton murders. Be at the airport in forty-five minutes.”

Hiss hung up. Locke pressed the off button and threw the phone against the seat. Had Hiss been sitting there, Locke would’ve strangled him with the seat belt. Under normal OWG procedures, the choice would be easy between a criminal and a partner. This time, it wasn’t so simple.

Ironically, Locke knew where Hiss meant. This area was the scene of Hamilton’s second murder.

All the information they needed sat three hundred yards from Locke, if he could just figure how to get it out of Hamilton. If only Hiss could stand being in the same room as the murderer.

But Locke couldn’t take the risk. Even if he persuaded Hiss to come down to Homicide, what if Hamilton mentioned Locke had just been there? Hiss wouldn’t listen to anything else after. He’d take Locke into custody for violating the Director’s mandate, no matter how much information Locke uncovered.

No, Locke would have to let the next conversation wait. The anticipation would eat its way through his body until the next time. It would gnaw at him from the time he pulled out of the Homicide parking lot until he came back. But he had no choice since Hiss expected him at the airport.

The time away from Gambling City might give Locke a chance to plan out different tactics in confronting Hamilton. Had he stormed in there now, he would’ve been running on pure emotion, coming away empty-handed yet again. Moreover, with one wrong move he could’ve gotten caught and landed a death sentence.

With a heavy right foot, Locke pulled out of the parking lot, hoping no one noticed him pull in. He tried to clear his head on the way home, stocking it with good feelings in an effort to settle down. The OWG providing for everything for everyone. The System making sure nobody wanted for anything. Govicide making it all happen. He even entertained the thought of a partnership between the OWG and Hamilton.

What a great ending to a bad story: “Govicide Agent convinces Hamilton to reveal secrets of living outside the System. Ends in OWG becoming more efficient and subjects receiving even more Goods and Services.”

Was it possible? Sure it was. Yes, Hamilton hated the System—he killed those Agents after all. But, he didn’t want to see the Masses die, subjects who had done him no harm. Did he? He was a Free Enterpriser, but still . . .

Maybe Hamilton would be reasonable. Forget all this talk about Pyramids and rights. If Locke persuaded Hamilton to teach everyone his abilities, the Masses would become even more efficient, thus improving the OWG.

With Locke’s success, Jade would surely be allowed to get her abortion with no penalties.

Then, everything would be back to normal. The OWG would still be in control but better. Govicide would hunt Offenders down but there would even be fewer of them. And the System would keep track of everything but everyone would be improved.

It was the perfect answer.

He stopped to call the limousine driver before going inside his living quarters. The driver would be there in half an hour.

Jade sat on the couch reading her favorite magazine, OWG Female’s Monthly. “Where have you been?” Jade folded the magazine, tossing it beside her. Her cheeks rippled as her teeth ground behind them.

“I thought I told you to jump in bed.” If she’d been asleep, he wouldn’t have to give her the bad news.

“You can command everyone out there. But not in here. Where were you? Don’t tell me you were at Homicide this whole time.”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me. And I can’t tell you anyway.” Locke ducked into the bedroom to pack.

She followed.

Locke laid the envelope and the letter on the nightstand then pulled out his suitcase, noticing her shadow on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

Locke didn’t look up. “Hiss called. We’re leaving.” That last part was going to sting.

“Where are you going?” Her shadow drifted over him.

Locke felt her glare cutting through his back. “I can’t tell you that.” Locke grabbed his clothes, avoiding any eye contact.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never know where this case is going to take me.” His words spouted out like water from a fountain.

“Okay,” Jade said, surprising him. She sat on the bed beside the suitcase.

Locke shot her a quick glance. “You’re not mad?”

“Of course I am. I’m furious. But I can’t do anything about it, can I?”

There was no need for Locke to respond. They both knew the answer to that question.

She continued, “But I need to be convinced whatever you’re doing can get us out of this pregnancy.”

He hesitated in his packing to give her his full attention. “It will.”

“Then I won’t give you any more of a hard time.” She shook her head slowly.

“Thank you.” He kissed her and grabbed the envelope. He glimpsed the time on his phone. “I have time to tell you one interesting thing. You know this?” He pointed to the Symbol on the envelope “I found out a little bit more.”

“You did?” Locke’s favorite smile transformed her face.

“We had it wrong. It’s an upside-down U.” He turned it around.

“And what does it mean?” She touched his hand as she grasped the paper.

“I’m not sure.” The fears from the last two hours knocked at him again but this moment offered some insight. “But I have to ask you something, and don’t think I’m losing my mind. When you ride the bus, do you look out? Do you watch the scenery go by?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think anybody does. Did you?”

“No, I didn’t either until I interrogated Hamilton. Then, on the way home I noticed the casinos are kind of rundown. And lots of buildings are empty. And the streets are empty. But, I’m not sure what he did or said to change my behavior. It’s like he opened my eyes or something. Don’t you think it’s strange that nobody looks out?” He thought of those two buses passing on the street.

“I guess,” she shrugged.

He sat beside her. “Tell me this. When was the last time you remember watching the buildings and signs go by while you were on the bus?”

Jade’s hand went to her face, her fingertips pushing into her left cheek. “I can’t remember. Maybe a year? Two years? I think I just got bored.”

“Yes . . .” Her words caused his mind to latch on to a new thought, but the thought slipped away. “Anyway, these upside down U’s are all over town but it doesn’t seem like anyone has noticed them. They’re everywhere.”

“I’ve never seen them.”

“No wonder. You’re not watching your surroundings,” he answered right back. “Oh, and I figured out Hamilton marked each of the murder scenes with this Symbol. And now I’ve found them all over town.”

“All over? And nobody sees them?”

“Yes, because, like you, everyone has their heads down. But I’m not sure that’s the entire answer.”

“Does the Director know? Govicide Agent Hiss?”

He glanced at his phone. The driver would be there soon. “I just figured it out myself. And I can’t tell them because I’m afraid the conversation will eventually make its way back to your pregnancy and this envelope.”

Locke handed it to her.

“What could it mean? It looks like a hump.” Jade laughed. “That couldn’t be right.”

It was nice to hear her laugh after all the stress they’d been feeling. “No, I don’t think so.”

Jade placed the envelope on the bed. Locke put it in an inside pocket of his jacket and stood up.

“Shouldn’t someone ask Hamilton about it?”

Locke hesitated as he shut the suitcase. She didn’t seem to notice. “I’m sure the Director will get around to it.”

Then, as if Hamilton was standing in the room, Locke heard the murderer’s voice. *I am what the OWG fears.*

The Director was afraid of Hamilton?

Fear. That’s what Locke noticed when Hamilton’s name came up during his interview. During the entire Hamilton conversation, the Director gazed out his huge window, avoiding eye contact with Locke—a subtle sign the Director was unsure of himself.

Preposterous. Locke laughed out loud, startling himself. The Director, like the OWG, feared nothing. But, what if the Director already realized Hamilton was a--

“What’s so funny?” Jade asked.

“Nothing.” He leaned over and kissed her. “I’m really going to miss you. But I will be back as soon as possible.”

The limousine pulled up a minute later. Locke left Jade standing in the doorway.

Locke realized his travel on the roads of Gambling City had taken on a new significance. His eyes were wide open. Searching. Investigating. Seeking. The need to see the Symbols eclipsed his missing of Jade.

These OWG buildings, stores, bus stops, and signs he passed so many times. True, he’d been gone quite a bit for Hamilton’s case. But, every time he returned he traveled these particular streets. There were no Symbols here or he would’ve seen them.

But, he remembered: He had his head down like everyone else until recently.

And before long, looking out the passenger side window, the Symbols revealed themselves. His hand covered his eyes, trying to ignore them. He peeked out between his fingers.

The Symbols were hard to see since it was dark and the limousine motored down each block at over sixty miles per hour. But he caught a glimpse of enough of them. He spotted one on the brick wall of the OWG restaurant where he and Jade ate on their first date. It took all his credits to take her.

He found another at the stop where he used to change buses. One was even scrawled on a sidewalk Locke traveled between bus stops. He’d stepped right on it and not noticed.

His shivering returned. He’d thought himself better than this. An hour and a half ago he’d thought other subjects missed these Symbols because he was in an area he didn’t frequent anymore.

But these Symbols, they were practically in his backyard. He’d passed them just days ago and hadn’t seen them. They hadn’t been there, had they? They must have been spray-painted on these surfaces within the last 48 hours.

No sense lying to himself. He knew better. All of these were old, like the others he saw.

And not one subject, including Locke, did anything about them. Not one subject tried to erase them or wash them away because nobody noticed them in the first place. And if Hamilton hadn’t given him that simple puzzle, he wouldn’t have seen them either.

What was wrong with everyone?

What was wrong with him?

It was one thing to claim others weren't giving attention to their environment. To their city. To their streets.

But now it was Locke himself.

Locke tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Driver."

The male took his eyes off the road to glance in the rearview mirror. "Yes, Govicide Agent Locke?"

"What do you think about these upside U's out there?" Locke pointed to the street.

The limousine traveled a block while the driver surveyed each side. Locke counted how many Symbols they passed. Ten, at least.

"What do you think? How many did you see?"

"Well . . ."

"What?"

"I did not see any. Is this some sort of trick, Govicide Agent Locke?"

"Wait." Locke leaned forward. "You're telling me we traveled a block and you didn't see one? I counted ten."

"Well, I am . . . uh . . . driving and well . . . I did not want to look too hard. I might wreck," the driver stuttered.

Locke noticed a Symbol coming up on the right side of the limousine. It was bright in the headlights. A Symbol on a green metal box just off the sidewalk. "See that?"

The driver studied where Locke pointed. He squinted and seemed to notice it.

"You saw it?"

"The black upside down U on the green box? Yes, I saw it." The driver seemed proud of himself.

"Okay. Great. Have you seen any of them anywhere else?"

"No, Govicide Agent Locke. That is the first one I have ever seen." The driver looked in the rearview mirror for reassurance.

"The first one? But they're all over!" Locke shouted at the driver.

"Sorry, Govicide Agent Locke. Am I in trouble?"

"No, no of course not." Locke lowered his head. "How about giving a little closer attention to your surroundings from now on?"

"Yes, sir, Govicide Agent Locke. I will. If I can ask, what is it? Someone should be getting in trouble for defacing OWG property."

"Only if somebody notices," Locke grumbled under his breath.

CHAPTER 25

Locke dragged his luggage to the Govicide Gate. This journey was getting familiar. The pilots and attendants were already preparing the SST for the flight. Locke didn't see Hiss. Boarding the plane, the flight attendants informed him Hiss hadn't arrived yet.

Hmmm. Putting his luggage behind the seat, Locke found his seat at the rear. An attendant came over to take his order. He asked for OWG Orange Juice.

Just moments from takeoff, Locke thought about calling Hiss to see if everything was okay. However, when he pulled out his phone, Hiss appeared at the entrance to the plane.

He nodded at Locke. "Received some new information. It delayed me."

Hiss wedged his luggage behind a seat near Locke's. Locke cocked his head an inch to the side. On the other flights, Hiss made it a point to sit in the front. This time, Hiss couldn't be closer.

"Oh. Something I should know?"

"Just something that happened in the last couple hours. I will tell you about it in the air," Hiss answered, buckling the seatbelt around his girth.

The answer stopped Locke in mid-sip. What happened within the last two hours? His visit to Hamilton.

The SST backed away from the gate and started its slow crawl to the end of the runway.

Locke tried to tell himself he was being paranoid. There were a hundred different pieces of news Hiss could've gotten in the last couple hours. He could've been informed of another cash location. Or, maybe another warehouse full of cash.

But, why did Hiss want to wait until they were in the air?

The SST arched upward and separated itself from the ground. Out of the corner of his eye Locke watched Hiss nurse his OWG Non-Alcohol Liquid. Hiss, unlike the other times, didn't bring something to read. Instead, he stared at Gambling City vanishing into the haze.

Locke tapped his fingers on the armrest, fear increasing the rhythm with every beat. Not a fear of flying this time. A fear of Hiss' knowledge. Locke balled his hands into fists for control. The fingernails dug into his palms like shovels. The tapping transferred to his knees and feet. One way or another, the fear wanted out. Now.

The plane leveled off, reaching cruising altitude.

Locke couldn't take the suspense anymore. It was either ask, or allow his fear to cause him a heart attack. "So, what did you want to tell me?"

"Govicide Headquarters called me an hour ago," Hiss answered, then shot Locke a glance. Locke corrected himself. It wasn't a glance. The look was a penetrating accusation.

The statement hung in the air between them. A pause. Then a moment. Then a few seconds. *This is bad.* Grabbing his drink, he turned his head to avoid Hiss' eyes.

“What did they want?” Locke fought to keep his voice neutral. But if the glass of orange juice had been made of paper, he would’ve crushed it. Degree by degree, his head turned to Hiss.

Hiss opened his mouth and seemed to think for a second. “A red flag popped up on the System.” One eyebrow rose like a hangman’s noose. “And it had to do with you.”

“Me?” Locke squeaked. In milliseconds, he journeyed through the process of his visit to Hamilton. He couldn’t imagine how he might have tipped off the System. His plan had been foolproof.

Did Govicide have a bug in his living quarters? Had they heard the conversations between him and Jade? Probably not. He wouldn’t be on this SST if that were so. He’d be behind bars, like Hamilton. The pregnancy, talking about the Symbol, not telling Hiss about the letter slipped under the door. Those points alone would be trouble.

Did the Security Guard report his visit with Hamilton? This didn’t seem possible either. A security guard knew better than to implicate a Govicide Agent in anything.

Maybe Locke had been wrong about his Hamilton insights. Had the killer told Govicide about their un-mandated meeting? Had he compromised?

Or, was somebody following Locke? He discarded this idea, too. All the stopping and starting he’d done would have revealed someone keeping tabs.

“The System popped a red flag because of me? Why?” Locke’s voice fluttered like a butterfly. “I’m trying to think. I didn’t do anything to set it off.”

“All Govicide vehicles have tracking devices on them. And the System registered a red flag because your automobile came too close to Hamilton multiple times. You remember the Director mandated Hamilton is off-limits, correct?”

“Yes,” Locke eeked like a mouse. His mind swirled. Forget foolproof. He was the fool. How could he have been so stupid not to realize Govicide would track their vehicles? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. All buses were tracked. All SST’s were tracked. All limousines were tracked. Every mode of transportation, including bikes.

His orange juice made an effort to climb his throat. Locke tried to hold it down.

How would he explain this?

But Hiss bailed him out. “Did you go down to Homicide to get some more of your things?”

Locke blinked and hesitated. *Say something . . .* “Uh, yeah. I did. I knew all the automobiles had tracking but I guess it slipped my mind.”

“The red flag registered after a half hour of the vehicle being close to him.”

“I grabbed another box of my Homicide stuff. But while I was there I decided to review Hamilton’s cases. Thought there might be something I missed. Something that could help us out regarding Dale City and Cornville.” A lie disguised with some truth. Would it be enough to not set off Hiss’ senses?

“You are correct. The System Administrators retrieved the records. The System registered the computer was used for an hour and a half, and his files were viewed.”

Why hadn’t Hiss asked him straight out if he used the computer? Hiss had just tested him.

The truth hit him harder than the punch Hiss gave him in Cornville. Hiss wanted to see if Locke would confess the entire story.

Hiss continued. “However, the same file was viewed for the last half hour. Why is that?”

Locke remembered leaving the computer on while he went to see Hamilton. “Well, I perused everything I wanted to see. And I got caught up getting a few items and forgot to turn it off until I left. Just kind of escaped my mind.” Locke shrugged. His stomach pumped the orange juice a little higher into his throat.

Locke felt like an Offender as Hiss examined him. He gripped the armrests. If Hiss noticed, he’d know Locke was lying. He tried to ease his hold but his muscles wouldn’t cooperate.

“So, you did not talk to Hamilton?” Hiss leaned closer.

Locke broke into a laugh, but shut his mouth when he felt juice on his tongue. “What? Talk to him? What could he say to me?”

Hiss replied in a monotone, “That may be true, but should not the first reason be the Director’s mandate?”

Dang it. “Of course, that’s a given.” Locke clung to the armrests harder. He’d have marks on his palms when this was over.

Locke understood why Hiss had waited until the SST took off, because Locke felt like leaving the jet. But it was a long way down now.

Hiss planned it pretty well. He found out about Locke’s movements just an hour before departure and put together an interrogation plan. Locke felt stuck in an interrogation room. No door, nowhere to escape, nowhere to run.

Well played, Hiss.

“The immediate concern, Govicide Agent Locke, should always be what the Director wants. Although we may have our independent ideas and good reasons, the first reason should always be whether the Director mandates something or does not. Whether Hamilton would say anything to you is not relevant.”

“I know what Director Stallings said.” Locke felt his voice getting a bit higher. Calm yourself, Michael. “That’s the first thing on my mind. I just wanted you to know there were other reasons.”

“The other reasons do not matter. In any case, I told them you would never ignore the Director’s mandates. Because you know better.” Locke wasn’t sure the Agent believed what he said. It sounded more like a question. “Oh, and I conveniently forgot to tell the Director I found you outside Hamilton’s cell when we first met.”

“Thank you, Govicide Agent Hiss.” The acid from Locke’s stomach hit his tongue, stinging and chopping Locke’s words short.

“You are so very welcome, Govicide Agent Locke. But I think you may be under some increased scrutiny when we return to Gambling City.” Hiss’ mouth creased into a smile.

Increased scrutiny? Locke didn’t like the sound of that at all. He unbuckled himself from his seat and stood. The orange juice wanted out of his body . . . right now.

“Need to stretch out?” Hiss asked.

“Uh, no. Bathroom.”

Down the aisle, Locke made a beeline for the restroom. The flight attendants were ahead of him, chatting and laughing about something. He didn’t acknowledge them as he passed.

He squeezed past them. He had no sooner shut the door than he threw up in the toilet bowl. The OWG Orange Juice hit the bowl with the kind of force reserved for fire hoses.

Locke tried to be quiet so the flight attendants wouldn't hear. Yet, the top half of his body refused to obey his brain's commands.

A wave rippled through his upper body, starting in his mid-section and ending at the tip of his tongue. Everything shook. His stomach was empty but the tremors continued. His body alternated between shuddering and stiffening.

All the while mental pictures of the Director, Jade, Hiss, the Security Guards, and Hamilton flashed through his mind. Paranoid images of Agents taking Jade away. The Director reading the letter. Hiss talking to the Security Guards. Hamilton being taken to the guillotine. The imagery alternated back and forth, one after the next.

And they didn't stop when the convulsing ceased. Another vision came into his mind, crippling his legs and bringing him to the floor: Agents waiting for him when they got off the SST. It occurred to him: he wasn't sure the SST flew toward the Fourth Continent. Maybe their destination was the District where the Director and others awaited.

The three-foot by three-foot lavatory felt half its size, and shrinking. Locke contemplated his next move. He wished he could crawl down through the toilet and into the night sky. This SST was nothing but a holding cell now.

He tried to collect himself. His body still shook, but not due to vomiting. Chills invaded. His nerves were letting him down. He shook as though he'd been stuck at the North Pole with nothing but a t-shirt and shorts.

To stop his shivering, he grabbed the sink top with both hands. But his arms shook so much he couldn't keep a steady grip. He put his hands into each opposite armpit to try to calm his body. He hugged himself tight.

But, even if the vibrations of terror disappeared, the fear would still be there. The fear of returning to his seat and not knowing what Hiss might say next.

Locke stared at his blue eyes in the mirror, wishing he could take back the past few hours.

No, he didn't really wish that. He still would've gone to see Hamilton, but he would've been smarter about it.

With a combination of generating friction by rubbing his arms and buttoning his suit jacket, he got control of his body. Now, the chills lessened, starting at his feet and going right through his shoulders. But they were manageable.

He needed to know where the SST's destination. To ask the flight attendants or the pilots would be absurd. Moreover, they wouldn't tell him the truth if Hiss had told them not to.

He'd have to find out for himself. How?

An idea came to him. Sure, it might work. And it would appear innocent enough.

Locke straightened his hair in the mirror and unbuttoned the top and bottom buttons of his jacket. He inhaled and exhaled then opened the lavatory door. Stepping out, he acknowledged the flight attendants, smiling.

Fifty feet away, Hiss still sat in his seat, flipping through a magazine.

With a fake spring in his step, Locke strolled to one of the small, oval windows. If he saw nothing but black below, they were over the Western Ocean. The SST had flown long enough they should be over water by now.

But, if he saw lonely lights, it meant they were over the First Continent, headed to the District.

If he saw lights, Locke wasn't sure how to handle it. A good subject of the Masses would confess to Hiss and await his punishment, like most subjects did when awaiting the arrival of Govicide at their door.

Could Locke be as obedient?

He suspected his first instinct upon seeing lights below would be to . . . No, he was un-mandated to have that thought. Plus, he shouldn't get ahead of himself.

Locke peered out into the clear night and saw what he hoped to see--darkness. He waited a few seconds for the glimmer of any lights. Nothing.

His body slumped against the wall. All these poisonous thoughts about Hiss conspiring against him scampered away. He was still an Agent in good standing.

And he'd be landing on the Fourth Continent in hours.

For several seconds, he got lost in the gorgeous blackness below him. After soaking in the view, he returned to his seat.

"You alright?" Hiss asked, focused on his magazine.

"Yeah, fine. Still getting used to flying." Locke buckled himself in.

"Took me almost six months. Just like riding in a limousine now."

"I'm sure I'll get used to it in time."

"How did your driving practice go?" Hiss kept his concentration on the magazine.

What was he talking about? What was he talking about? What was he talking about? The question scrambled through Locke's brain and the shivers returned. "Huh?"

"Your practicing. After you went to your Homicide office, you went for a drive. The WPS tracked you driving around the east side of town. You were practicing driving, right?"

The meaning dawned on Locke. He'd have to lie again. How many lies was he up to now? "Yes, I was. It went fine. Didn't hit anything. I actually drove over to the cash warehouse . . ." Why hide it? ". . . to see if I remembered the way. Did it with no problem." The lies came out like the OWG truths he professed during his first thirty years.

"Good. I knew you would get the hang of it."

Reclining in his seat, Locke stared into the blackness outside the aircraft. Was this what he could expect from life in Govicide? In one moment being revered by the Masses in a train station. The next wondering if he'd be taken to the District for extensive interrogations.

But, he'd brought this on himself by committing un-mandated actions. On the other hand, he didn't intend to stay uninformed like Hiss was either.

Locke wished he could tell Hiss what he knew, but any conversation would eventually get back to the pregnancy, and that couldn't happen. He couldn't give Hiss half of the information. If half came out, then all of it would.

Across the aisle, Hiss chortled, sounding like he had a sinus infection.

Locke thought of the Symbols infecting Gambling City. Would he see them elsewhere?

CHAPTER 26

It wasn't a noise that woke Locke but a smell. Familiar. Rich. Penetrating. OWG Coffee.

Opening his eyes, he squinted at the light streaming through the windows. Hiss' seat was empty.

Locke pushed the button on his armrest and the seatback rose to the upright position. He yawned once to shake off the remnants of sleep. But, the coffee aroma did more than anything to wake him.

In a few seconds, not the flight attendants, but Hiss brought him a cup of the steaming brown liquid. "I did not know how you like it."

"Thanks. As long as it's hot, it's fine." Locke grabbed the cup, surprised by Hiss' kindness. It certainly was out of the old Agent's character from what Locke saw so far. With suspicion, Locke took a sip. The heat stung his lips.

Locke set the cup on the tray while Hiss took his seat across the aisle.

"Did you sleep?" Locke asked.

"A couple hours. You were out like a light."

"Long day," he answered. "When do we land?"

"Another forty five minutes."

A slight feeling of weightlessness came over Locke and he steadied his cup to make sure it wouldn't spill. The SST was descending.

Many of the fears that riddled him the night before were gone. He was still alive. The sun was shining and the partner he thought turned on him just served him OWG Coffee. Not bad. Not bad at all.

With a new day ahead of him Locke wondered if he overreacted last night. He'd been tired. Sure, Hiss asked him some pointed questions, but the Agent believed all Locke's answers, or rather lies. Even the idea that Govicide might watch him a little more closely didn't phase him. He'd stay in line for the next few days. Let the issue blow over. Be lockstep in line with Hiss. And when they got back to Gambling City, he'd figure out his next move and how he'd manage to speak with Hamilton again.

One point was certain. If he wanted to see Hamilton, he couldn't drive there.

Locke watched out the window as the SST glided closer and closer to the clouds. He knew under those clouds existed a virtual wasteland. No plants. No trees. Nothing but a tundra of snow, ice, and dirt.

He shivered thinking about his last time there. The long, boat ride from the First Continent. The ice on the decks. Snowfall like he'd never seen before.

The wind would be howling at about 30 miles per hour. If they were lucky, whatever vehicle met them would be equipped with a working heater. The last time, the bus from the train station to the murder scene didn't have one. He and the other subjects kind of huddled together during the hour-long ride.

He remembered the pictures of that particular murder scene he'd viewed on the computer at Homicide. During the murder, Hamilton wrote the upside down U directly above the murdered Govicide Agent's head, right in the snow. No one noticed.

The memories gave Locke a daring idea--an inkling in his mind that Hiss might know about the Symbol, even though it hadn't been a topic of discussion between them. Just as Locke withheld information, he suspected Hiss might be doing the same.

Locke checked to see if Hiss was watching him. He wasn't. He, too, stared at the clouds as they hovered closer. The SST bounced from the wind swirls and updrafts from these gray fluffs.

Flattening out his coffee napkin, Locke took a pen from his suit jacket. On the napkin, he drew the upside down U.

When the SST entered the next cluster of clouds, he raised his coffee. The jet lifted up and settled in its flight line. As the jolt occurred, Locke acted like it knocked the napkin out of his hand. In reality, he threw the napkin in Hiss' direction.

The napkin landed at Hiss' feet.

"Wow, I wasn't ready for that." Locke exaggerated the statement, drawing out each word longer than usual. "What was it?"

"Turbulence." Hiss answered, not seeing the napkin at his feet.

"Pretty strong."

The SST once again bucked and moved. The first movements were up and down. The next ones side to side.

"Just wind within the clouds."

"Scared me so much I dropped my napkin." Locke indicated it with his chin.

Hiss spied the napkin. It had landed with the Symbol facing up. Hiss couldn't miss it. He bent over and retrieved it. Locke watched Hiss' eyes for any sense Hiss had seen the Symbol before.

"Were you drawing something?" he asked Locke, examining the Agent's work.

"Doodling. Just letting my mind wander," he lied but his eyes locked on Hiss'.

"Didn't have any regular paper."

Hiss narrowed his eyes. "What is this? A U?" He flipped the napkin over. "A hill? What were you trying to draw?"

"Like I said. I was only doodling." Locke stretched out his hand for Hiss to pass the napkin back. He placed it back under his cup.

Hiss had no idea about the Symbol. Locke could tell by the Agent's indifference. Hiss hadn't noticed the Symbols all over the streets of Gambling City. He hadn't noticed the Symbol in the Hamilton murder pictures. He hadn't even noticed the huge Symbol on the front of the warehouse in Gambling City.

Locke nodded but kept his smile of satisfaction inside.

Snow City was as cold and uncomfortable as Locke forecasted. No snowfall this time but plenty of snow on the ground. The wind chill cut through Locke's layers like a saw. The airport was nothing like Gambling City's, more like Cornville's train station. No jet way to go out to the SST. Instead, OWG airport workers rolled stairs over to it.

Locke came prepared with his long underwear, hat, and heavy coat. Last time, he'd under-packed and it cost him. He didn't know the word "frostbite" before Snow City.

Entering the airport, Locke and Hiss got a small respite from the blistering weather. The building wasn't warm, but it felt nice to get out of the wind. After taking a few moments to catch their breath, the two Agents exited on the other side. Their limousine

awaited them on the curb. The vehicle was a different model, a kind Locke couldn't remember seeing the last time he was there. It had different markings, appeared older, and gruff sounds came from under the hood.

The driver spoke with a thick accent—the W's were V's and the V's were W's. He detailed where he'd take them, where they'd stay, and the distance from the hotel to the scene.

Night was already upon Snow City. It was eighteen hours ahead of Gambling City and even with the speed of the SST, they landed here almost a day later than they left. As the limousine maneuvered along the hard streets the sun set for the second time in a day.

This city boasted a remarkable landscape. The horizon couldn't be seen on three sides of the city due to the encircling mountains and inactive volcanoes. A bay to its south led out to the Western Ocean.

As the limousine turned onto another bumpy street, movement outside caught Locke's attention. Off to the passenger's side, a piece of paper flapped in the wind, taped to a telephone pole. The paper was larger than eight by eleven, but smaller than poster size. And on that white piece of paper . . .

A black Symbol.

Somebody taped the paper to the pole.

Was it placed there for Locke to see it?

Hiss had been looking in that direction. If he remembered the Symbol on Locke's napkin, he didn't show it.

Their vehicle passed the Symbol and in another block stopped in front of the hotel. The Agents found their rooms, changed into warmer gear, and met at the limousine. It pulled out, right in front of an OWG bus. Twenty minutes later, the limousine slid to a stop along a fence on the other side of the bay.

The Local OWG Authorities, expecting the Agents arrival, had spotlights ready, pointing them onto the shoreline and water. Long concrete docks extended out into the darkness. Each of them, three in all, were about 500 feet long. Another made a semi-circle out into the bay, connecting to the mainland at two points 750 feet from each other. These structures dwarfed the concrete slab in Cornville.

Near their parking spot, someone had cut a hole in the links of the fence. Locke slipped through, barely touching the metal. Hiss caught his coat on the barbed edges and needed Locke's assistance in untangling himself.

"Didn't see this the last time I was here." Locke said once they neared the spotlights.

"Looks like a shipyard. Built probably forty years ago," Hiss answered.

Down by the water's edge, two males stood talking in that weird accented OWG language. They saw the Agents approaching and met them halfway, bowing when they got close. "Hello, vee are local OWG Authorities." The male pointed to himself and his partner. "A young boy playing here. Found hole in fence. Found cash buried in snow."

The representative reached into his heavy coat pocket and pulled out bills. He handed them to Hiss, who gave one to Locke.

The bill was a "100," identical to the ones in Cornville. Brittle from being in the snow, it crackled when Locke bent it.

"Thank you. You can leave us now. Govicide is officially in charge of this site." Hiss' tone and his hand gesture caused the males to leave the Agents at once.

"Same bills as in Cornville," Locke stated when the locals were out of earshot.

“I see that.” Hiss started toward the shoreline. Locke followed.

They found a hole at the water’s edge. If Locke was forced to guess, he believed the child slipped through the fence and found a couple of bills. When the child alerted the Local Authorities--since the OWG taught all children how evil cash was, they showed up and dug this hole, exposing a huge amount of cash. The amount was about the same quantity they found flying around outside Cornville.

“If this is a shipyard, where are the ships?” Locke peered out into the bay.

“Ships? Most ships have been dismantled. They use up credits that could generate more Goods and Services. Except for the few the Masses ride, of course.”

“Like the ones I rode following Hamilton all over the world?”

“Exactly. But there are less than twenty of those. Too many in my opinion.” Hiss grabbed a cold stone from the shore and tossed it into the water.

“But these docks aren’t the kind a ship uses. They’re too small.” Locke watched the ripples from Hiss’ stone disappear.

“Thirty years ago when ships were smaller these could have been used.” Hiss pointed out one of the docks. “But now, we have bigger ships. There are fewer, but we carry the same amount of subjects. The OWG is always thinking.” Hiss tapped his head.

The docks were so low, ships would need to be one-tenth the size of a current OWG Ocean Liner to use them.

They took a short walk over to the nearest dock and stopped a quarter of the way out on it. The wind, full of the smell of salt, kicked up, causing them to draw their coats closer up around their necks.

This solid structure spanned about fifty feet across and rose ten feet above the water. Fixed steel moorings were spaced out about every two hundred feet. They were on each side enabling more than one ship to park.

Saying nothing, Locke and Hiss gazed at the water. Locke’s mind fixed on the lonely Symbol, surviving on that telephone pole.

Hiss spoke first. “It is clear what occurred here. These Offenders were moving cash. Had some boats. Brought the boats here and a little cash fell off as they were transferring it from the boats to whatever they used to move the cash on land.” Hiss sounded proud of his deductive abilities.

“Or the cash got here by land and they picked it up by boat,” Locke countered.

Hiss’ head swiveled and stopped on Locke. “I suppose that could have happened, too,” he glared.

“Isn’t the real question, what does the Cornville site have in common with a dock in a city covered with snow most of the year?” Locke allowed the statement to sink into Hiss. “That’s the puzzle. Not how the cash got here then taken away.”

The older Agent didn’t answer. He seemed to ignore Locke.

Locke wasn’t surprised, so he tried a different line. “You really think these subjects are only Offenders and not something more?” Locke kept his voice deliberately casual while studying the bay.

“What else would they be?”

“Well, if we wanted to go by the Manual, a subject could make the point that this isn’t the action merely of Offenders but . . .” Locke had to try. “. . . Free Enterprisers?”

Hiss’ chin fell to his chest, rubbing it as his head shook. “I hope you will not be like this every time.”

“Like what?” Locke answered, remembering Hamilton’s Free Enterpriser confession.

“If every time you see a bill of cash or somebody going outside of the System you jump to the conclusion it is the work of Free Enterprisers. It will get old real fast.”

Locke cleared his throat, a mist escaping from his mouth. “We’re supposed to go by the OWG Manual and it says . . .”

Hiss interrupted, “. . . Free Enterprisers do not exist. No matter how you may interpret what is in those 1000 pages. What the Manual says is that no one wants to overthrow the System or the OWG. Who would be so stupid? Everything is provided. Everything is given. Everything is covered. And just because a few un-disciplined subjects--Hamilton and whoever else--have some scheme going on, does not mean they are Free Enterprisers.”

“I think you’re missing something here, Govicide Agent Hiss,” Locke felt the hair on the back of his cold neck rise. *Easy, Michael.*

“Free Enterprisers are theoretical. It is a way to scare subjects with what can happen when the Masses are left to their own devices. That is it.” Hiss chopped his left hand through the cold air. “I wish Hamilton and the rest of them were Free Enterprisers. I would be thrilled. Something that does not exist is suddenly alive. I would make a name for myself in defeating a legend. I would probably get the Director’s Chair like that.” Hiss snapped his gloved fingers. “But look, as bad as the murders of those Agents were, they do not compare to attacking the System, or getting the Masses to protest the OWG. But none of that has happened. Has it?”

Locke couldn’t help but answer, “No.”

“In fact, they have done everything to avoid the System and the OWG. From what we can tell, none of this cash has ended up in a large multitude of hands. And it has been how long? Months? Two years? Nothing. So, let us bring the Free Enterpriser talk back to reality.”

Hiss had a point. There were thousands of Agents. Hamilton murdered fourteen. Hardly a Free Enterpriser revolution. Double that amount died every year from natural causes and accidents.

“Maybe you’re right.” Locke wanted to keep to a three-word answer but he couldn’t help himself. “But what if Hamilton said that he was a Free Enterpriser?”

Hiss invaded Locke’s space. “Why? Did you talk to him? Is that what you were doing at Homicide?” He tried to catch Locke’s glance but Locke did his best to avoid the connection.

“No. Of course not.” Locke retreated a step. He shouldn’t have mentioned Hamilton. Or Free Enterprisers. Either subject was too close to the edge. He needed to back away from those topics. He was on shaky ground as it was.

“Govicide Agent Locke, do you know how many times over the years Offenders claimed they were Free Enterprisers?” Hiss continued to stare at Locke. “It is a joke by now. Everyone has delusions of grandeur. Nobody can be a regular criminal. These Offenders want to be the worst but few—well, really--none have the stomach for it. They do what they can to get around the System, taking a little bit here, a little bit there, and then when they get caught they say they were trying to overthrow the System. Then, after a few torture sessions, they discover how much they love the OWG. It is a joke. And over time, you will get the punch line. There are no Free Enterprisers.”

Locke oscillated between viable but opposite ideas. On one hand, all the evidence pointed toward the idea that the OWG was in the process of being overthrown. This included Hamilton's own words in calling himself a Free Enterpriser. The Symbols. The cash. The murders of the Agents.

On the other hand, nothing within the System and the OWG had been attacked. And, this had been going on for two years. Wouldn't something big have happened by now? Maybe Hiss' position was stronger than Locke wanted to admit. Hiss was the one with the experience, after all. He was correct. Sometimes criminals had delusions that they were more important and bigger than they were. And above everything else, all Goods and Services were getting to the Masses without any problems.

"You're correct, Govicide Agent Hiss. You have the experience. Maybe I just need some more time under my belt so I can get the punch line."

"Exactly. I have had enough of this place and I am cold." Hiss withdrew to the shore.

Waiting for a few seconds before following Hiss, Locke watched the lights of Snow City five miles away. Set against the dark mountains, the city appeared to be a ship on the high seas, not anchored to the continent. Somewhere in that city somebody knew how to break the tie between these two competing ideas in Locke's head. But, he had no idea how to find him.

Was Hamilton what he claimed or not?

The driver had left the automobile running, so it felt toasty when the Agents climbed inside. He made a U-turn and drove along the fence. The local authorities disconnected the spotlights one by one. Each went out with a bang Locke heard from inside the automobile. Within thirty seconds, the bay faded to black.

Locke regained feeling in his toes by the time the limousine reached the outskirts of town. He waited with anticipation to see the paper Symbol sign he saw before. It would be on their way. He wanted to reassure himself there was something to his idea of Free Enterprisers on the move.

The automobile rounded a slight curve and Locke focused on the left side of the street. The headlights caught the telephone pole for a second. In that second, though, Locke noticed the paper had disappeared.

Locke's gaze followed the pole past the driver's side and the rear taillight. Then, the pole vanished into the night. Someone took the sign off the pole while they were out at the docks. Had the Symbol been specifically placed for Locke to see it?

He doubted it. No one knew they were here.

But no one knew they were in Dale City either.

No. The harsh wind ripped the paper off the pole. It was the only reasonable answer.

Locke grimaced, feeling the disappointment radiate from his gut.

"What are you looking at?" Hiss asked.

"Nothing," Locke answered on the heels of Hiss' last word.

A phone rang inside the auto. Locke checked his phone, but the ring belonged to Hiss.

Hiss reached into his pocket and pulled his out. "Hello . . . yes . . . is that right . . . really? . . . okay . . . tomorrow? . . . sure . . . where should we meet . . . uh-huh . . . seven

in the morning . . . we will be there.” Hiss pushed a button on the phone and dropped it into his pocket.

“Who was that?” Locke cleaned the sad expression from his face.

“A Controller. A satellite picked up a WPS signal north of here. Strange it still works after all this time. We will catch a helicopter tomorrow at seven.”

“We’re not heading back to Gambling City tomorrow?” He felt desperate to talk to Hamilton again. Locke controlled the hint of a whine in his voice.

“It has to be done. May break this case,” Hiss answered.

“How far away?”

“About three hours by helicopter.”

“Three hours? That’s three hundred miles?”

“About that.” Hiss poured himself a drink.

At the hotel, the Agents parted ways. Hiss found a stool at the OWG Bar and Locke ascended to his own room. It didn’t have a street view like the one in Dale City. Instead, the window opened to a brick wall a few feet away. The wall was so close, the room’s light created shadows on it.

Overall, the room was older, and not as nice. The wind penetrated the window seals, forming frost on the inside. Rips and tears populated the couch and chair. The lights, dim. The water, tepid. But, it was nicer than the place he stayed in last time.

Locke reclined on the lumpy bed. His mind time-traveled back to how simple things had been before he heard of Hamilton. The OWG was perfect. The System was perfect. No one was trying to kill Govicide Agents. He didn’t have to worry about Jade’s pregnancy and what it might mean to their future. All their Goods and Services came on time and there was no threat some group might be out there trying to undermine everything.

And he didn’t have to concentrate on every passing building or sign searching for the Symbol.

His brain recycled the thoughts over and over. Each time they came out more muddled.

A half hour crawled by, and he was no closer to sleeping. He needed a walk.

CHAPTER 27

Bundled up, Locke left the hotel, turning north into the wild wind. Alone on the street, he noticed the footprints in the snow of the subjects who preceded him in the hours before. With each step, he concentrated more on those footprints, like they were trying to tell him something. For two blocks he fought the invisible blowing force, head down, his eyes on those footprints.

In the middle of an intersection, he stopped. His thinking prevented him from going further. A question came to him as if written in the snow:

Would he know anyone else had been out there in the cold if there was no snow?

The question's answer had a much bigger meaning than anything having to do with precipitation.

The snow did . . . something.

He turned in a circle on the street, taking in all the snow and footprints around him, not caring if an OWG bus approached him.

Put it together, Michael. There's a puzzle right at your feet. The answer is there as well.

His concentration followed his tracks to the corner of the intersection. When it returned to his feet, he kicked the snow, and a feeling of warmth exploded inside of him, along with the solution.

That must be it: To tell history correctly, the proper conditions needed to exist.

He considered the puzzle in the opposite way: what if the snow didn't exist on the Snow City streets? What if they were bare?

Then, there would be no way to tell how many, if any, subjects had been out there during the day. No footprints. No tire tracks.

His insides heated to a flame again. The snow made it possible to show the true history. Without it, the past day was left up to interpretation. With it, an accurate picture of the past could be drawn.

There was more to this than subjects on a lonely street, though.

Equidistant from each curb, he crouched down, concentrating on all the various footprints. Large. Small. Wide. Skinny. Heels. Boots. Flats. Children's shoes. The wind did its best to blow him over but he steadied himself with a gloved hand to the white surface.

What if in certain parts of history, there had been no "snow"? Meaning, there was no way to tell what happened at that period in time. Those years would be open to interpretation. And whoever concocted the best story--whoever told the story the subjects wanted to hear--would fill in the blanks even if the story weren't true.

Whoever had the most power . . .

Locke compared his revelation to the street. Without snow, someone could come along and tell him no one walked the avenues of Snow City for days, or even weeks. How would Locke argue if there were no footprints?

The snow, though. The snow made it impossible for someone to lie.

As strong as the wind was, it couldn't knock Locke over. But the next question nearly did:

Was this what Hamilton meant by something existing but not existing?

Again, Locke made a comparison to the pavement beneath his feet. If Hamilton were there during the day, say . . . a day with no snow, he'd see the subjects walking and the buses passing. He wouldn't need any snow because he was an eyewitness.

Locke might come along later when everyone was gone. However, with no snow, he'd look at the neighborhood and think no one had ever been there. Hamilton, simultaneously, could come along and tell him subjects were there—that subjects existed on that street during the day. But, Locke would argue he saw no proof of that since there would be no snow to tell the true tale.

Specifically, to Hamilton, the subjects walking on that street during the day would exist. To Locke, they wouldn't.

And for them to both think the same way—for Locke to know Hamilton was telling the truth—something else had to support the killer's story.

The snow served this purpose. It saved the footprints and tracks as indentations in its smooth covering.

But putting this into a historical context, what did it mean?

The next burst of body heat caused him to sweat despite the single digit temperatures: It meant history could be covered up. Disguised. Cloaked. Camouflaged.

Like his few minutes in the SST lavatory where horrific images rolled frame-by-frame, new ones appeared to him. They were not as terrifying. Confusing more than anything else.

The wide city streets, the large airports, the empty buildings.

The Pyramids.

Somehow there was a relationship between those images and these footprints.

The only word that came to mind was "proof." But, proof of what? The OWG built those streets, the airports, and the buildings early on in its existence to prepare for the future when everyone would have everything.

Staying as long as he could in the middle of the street, he finally started back to the hotel. No amount of internal warmth generated from his new thoughts made his toes any warmer. His trench coat tried to flap open as the air found a way inside, inflating it like a balloon. Locke did his best to hold it down as he worked his way forward. He drew the collar of the coat higher around his neck and ears. Snow crunched beneath his shoes as he passed under each streetlight. When he visited the first time, the weather had been even colder and a walk like this would've been flirting with death.

He kept his head up, hoping to see another Symbol, but it was difficult. His eyes watered, turning crisp details into a blur. Not being able to resist the force, he bent down at a forty-five degree angle.

Every time the wind took a break from pelting him, Locke lifted his head to scan for Symbols. He saw none. Frustration doused the heat generated by his preceding footprint puzzle.

He stumbled as the harsh wind whipped him into the hotel. He stamped his frozen shoes on the carpet, the flakes falling off his soles and heels. After forty-five minutes out in the cold, the warmth of the lobby felt like a welcome change.

The elevator was out of service so he took the stairs to his room. No problem falling asleep this time. As his eyes closed, he visualized footprints appearing on the streets of Gambling City where it never snowed. He saw them in the airports. He saw them outside all the empty buildings. The streets. The oceans.

The rotors of the helicopter were already spinning when Locke and Hiss arrived the next morning. As the copter lifted and hovered forward, Locke raised his feet, a reaction to skimming across the ground. The altimeter said 100 feet, but it felt more like ten. Hiss laughed at Locke, and then seemed to lose interest.

Three hours, huh? Locke folded his arms against his body and rested the side of his head against the window. It was icy cold, like the air passing by. His skin would freeze in seconds if he fell asleep in this position. Instead, he cocked his head back and closed his eyes. He didn't have much success falling asleep this way but it was better than getting frostbite on his scalp.

Locke woke up to a shove from Hiss. "We are here."

Locke opened his eyes then squeezed them shut as the sun glinted off the snow, blinding him. He lifted his right arm for protection and squinted. In his peripheral vision, he saw Hiss handing him something.

"Put these on." Hiss pushed sunglasses into Locke's right hand.

These weren't normal sunglasses that covered the forward viewing area of the eye. These butted against the brow and cheeks. At first, he thought they were too dark.

Groping first for the handle of the helicopter's door, he opened it. As soon as he removed his right arm from his shielded eyes, he realized why the sunglasses were so dark. In the landscape of this white tundra, the sunglasses were perfect.

Out in front of him, Locke saw nothing but white desolation. Far in the distance, fifteen miles? Twenty miles? Maybe more, mountains sat like protectors of this flat land.

Locke fought his way through the rotors' downdraft until he was clear of their force.

Hiss came around from the other side, fighting the draft as well. "Govicide Agent Locke, over here." He motioned Locke to follow him.

They stood on snow and ice several feet thick but not one white particle flew in the air. The harsh wind pushed against Locke, but it wasn't strong enough to pick up anything off the hard-packed ice.

Rounding the helicopter, Locke stopped. What was a building doing out there?

But, the structure wasn't a building at all. It was a vehicle--flat tires the ultimate proof. It protruded above the terrain by fifteen feet, one hundred feet from the helicopter but appeared a lot closer due to its size.

An SST was larger, but this vehicle seemed like a chunk of steel. An SST was delicate. This vehicle could have been cut from granite. Eight wheels on each side, the large truck—Locke couldn't think of another word—looked like it had been green once but the environment turned it to mostly dark red over time.

The vehicle was divided into three sections. The front two axles supported the forward part. Three axles supported the middle. And three axles supported the rear.

Locke approached the vehicle from the driver's side.

Based on its color, he compared it to a brick with notches cut out so the tires had room to turn. There were small doors, like places to put equipment, toward the back.

Hiss stopped about ten feet from the vehicle. Locke caught up to him.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Locke commented.

“Me neither, Govicide Agent Locke.”

“Looks like a . . . uh . . . bus to me.” Locke had trouble coming up with a simple description.

“I thought so, too. But, it cannot hold more than a few subjects. See?” Hiss pointed to the left part of the vehicle. “Not much of a passenger compartment.”

“Can’t imagine driving this thing on any street, let alone way out here. It’s huge.” Locke laughed.

The Agents stood in silence for a few seconds. The wind whistled a shrill tune through the vehicle.

“And this is not the half of it. Follow me.” Hiss tramped out of view.

Locke watched Hiss disappear around the near side. He hustled to catch up. What he saw next stopped him mid-stride once again.

Strewn all over the tundra were pieces of metal and plastic. Wires. Bolts. Nuts. Rivets.

Hiss stood in the middle of the debris. The area dwarfed him.

“What is it?” Locke shouted. His partner didn’t appear to hear him.

Locke couldn’t tell if the parts were pieces of one device or many. If this junk had been a machine at one time, it would’ve been huge. Not as big as the vehicle, but large. He maneuvered through the junk, taking in the pile, not making any sense of what pieces went together and which ones didn’t.

“What is it?” Locke asked again, now closer to Hiss.

“I am a Govicide Agent not a OWG Engineer, Govicide Agent Locke.” Hiss held a piece of metal in his hands. He threw it to the ground. “I think if we gave the technicians a month they might be able to piece this all together into something. If it is anything at all.” Hiss hesitated then kicked a piece of the junk. He raised his head to the perfect blue sky and yelled, “Offenders! When I track you down, the OWG will have the last word on this! Do you hear me?” Hiss stopped to catch his breath.

“Is that what you want to do? Get some techs out here?” Locke asked after Hiss regained his composure.

Hiss shook his head. “Do you know how many Goods and Services might be wasted? Maybe . . . maybe . . . if the site was closer. Maybe if we could guarantee all this junk would amount to something.”

Locke put his hands on his hips, surveying the pieces. Hiss was correct. All the junk could be hauled back to Snow City for analysis but that would use up credits as well. They’d have to run a cost-benefit study, among other OWG procedures, before moving one piece. And that would take months. If they could guarantee this debris would help them catch the Free . . . uh . . . Offenders, Locke knew all the paperwork would be worthwhile. But without some guarantee, the junk would stay here forever.

“So, what do you want to do?” Locke queried while studying the pieces at his feet.

“Try to put some of these parts together.” Hiss stomped away.

“You want me to try to make sense of these parts by myself?”

The old Agent didn't look back. "You are a smart Agent. You can figure it out. I am going to investigate this vehicle."

Locke kicked a can-sized cylinder at his feet.

CHAPTER 28

Locke watched Hiss climb the machine. He compared it to a short dog trying to jump onto a tall couch. Somehow, Hiss scaled the vehicle until he was on top.

With a grunt, Locke picked through the pieces at his feet. Reasoning that pieces close to each other belonged together, he went about his work. He laid a few out to see if any parts fit, waiting for a picture to emerge.

He noticed right away the lack of barcodes on the parts. This was almost as unusual as them being there in the first place. Locke tried to remember when the bar-coding system started. Five years after the OWG formed? Seven years after? That made these pieces just about fifty years old.

One by one, he dragged the bigger pieces together. The largest part was the size of a washing machine. The smallest the size of a plate. It couldn't have been like the sixteen-wheeled truck. No wheels among the pieces. No axles, gears, or glass either.

After a half hour of picking out important-looking parts, Locke sat on one of the bigger pieces to rest. He felt the cold steel radiate through his three layers of clothing.

The picture he pieced together didn't look like anything he'd seen before. In fact, as he assessed what he accomplished so far, he learned much more about the subjects who tore this apart than anything about the object. Whoever dismantled this showed up much more prepared than he and Hiss. The subject--more likely a group--used torches, saws, pliers, and a whole host of other tools in their efforts, separating everything with care.

No ripping or tearing was evident. No dents from banging or pounding. No mangled metal. And, even though every metal piece showed rust to the point of being burnt orange, each seemed to retain its original form.

Inspecting the parts at his feet, his eyes diverted to the footprints he made stepping over them.

Footprints . . . again.

He added another fact to his list: the mysterious visitors' footprints had long since been swept away. Locke's and Hiss' footprints were the only ones in the snow. And not even an OWG Weathermale could predict how long it would take footprints to disappear out there.

A week? Two weeks? A month?

Locke let his thoughts stray to where the investigation led them. An empty warehouse in Dale City. A site surrounded by a fence near Cornville. A dock in Snow City. The warehouses in both Dale City and Gambling City. And now this place.

No connection between them. No connection this experienced detective could see anyway.

A half hour passed, and he'd forgotten all about Hiss. Locke gazed at the vehicle. His partner was no longer on top. Probably examining the other side of it. Maybe inside the driver's compartment. Locke kicked a curved piece at his feet.

Of course, if Hiss had returned to the helicopter to warm up . . .

After thirty seconds and no sign of Hiss, his suspicions arose and lifted him to his feet. He'd be delighted to catch Hiss neglecting his work.

Locke had a few steps behind him when he felt a weird sensation from his mid-section. Stopping, he put both of his gloved hands to his stomach. His phone. It vibrated when it rang.

With his gloves on, his hands didn't fit into the pockets. Somebody watching from far away might have thought Locke was trying to tickle himself. He shook his hands and body in an effort to get into those pockets. In a few seconds, the phone stopped vibrating.

As an absolute last resort, he removed his gloves. Fishing out the phone, he pressed the green button to see who called. His bare fingers, although out in the air for mere seconds, already began to feel the effects of the low double-digit temperatures.

The screen showed his living quarters' phone number.

Uh oh. Locke gazed up to the sky. A tinge of dread made him forget all about his cold fingers. Had someone found out about the pregnancy?

The phone beeped, indicating she left a message.

Surely Jade wouldn't leave a message about it. He hoped she didn't forget the OWG was always listening. Hitting the buttons so hard his fingernails hurt, he dialed the voicemail.

In a few seconds, he heard Jade's voice. "I think it's a graph." Five words. The phone asked him if he wished to save the message, repeat it or delete it, telling him to press the "3" if he wanted to listen again.

His heart rate eased when he heard the words. No mention of her pregnancy. Good. The OWG recording devices wouldn't be rolling.

He pressed the "3" to repeat the message. "I think it's a graph."

He thought about it for a second, then pressed the "3" again.

"I think it's a graph."

He heard the words, but didn't understand.

Had she dialed the wrong number? Maybe she intended the message for a co-worker. She often sent reports to different OWG officials and much of it had to do with graphing OWG transportation usage.

Still, he took a few cold breaths, remembering their last conversations. To his recollection, none were connected to graphs.

Locke pursed his chapped lips, debating whether he should return her call. He could always wait until he flew home. There was no rush. The call was most likely a mistake anyway. A misdial.

Though he tried, he couldn't deny his curious nature. Even if the message was a mistake, he'd love to hear her voice. But, if she meant to call Locke, then . . .

"Heck with it." Locke dialed the number.

"Hello," Jade answered.

"Hey, did you call me?" Locke shielded the phone's receiver from the wind.

"Michael? Where are you?"

"You know I can't tell you that. Got your message, but I'm not sure what you meant."

"It sounds like you're standing in a tornado. I can barely hear you."

"Doing the best I can here. You said something about a graph?" Locke almost interrupted her in his haste to get to the point.

"That thing. What did you call it? The upside down U thing."

At the same moment, Locke felt a presence. He spied two shadows stretched over the icy ground. His own and . . . Hiss'.

Locke didn't wheel around. He remained cool but his toes curled inside his boots. "Okay, Jade. The OWG allows me to love you too. Bye."

As Locke hit the red button on the phone, he heard Jade say, "What?"

"Whoa! Govicide Agent Hiss, you scared me." Locke faked a jump at seeing his partner standing a few feet from him.

"Who were you talking to?" Hiss pointed to the phone still in Locke's very cold right hand.

"It was Jade. She misses me. Can you believe we get reception out here?" He stared past Hiss, avoiding eye contact.

"You did not give her our location, did you?"

"Of course not."

Hiss leaned his head back, the bridge of his nose aligning perfectly with his eyes. Locke could peer right up his nostrils. "What did you find here?"

A small sigh of relief escaped Locke, it coming out as a tiny puff of mist. Hiss hadn't crept up on him by accident. He saw Locke pull out his phone and got curious. A few days ago it would've meant nothing. But now, with Locke's trip to Homicide and his drive afterward, this might have added to Hiss' suspicions.

He took a second to collect his thoughts. How could the Symbol be a graph? His pondering would have to wait.

"Well, uh, not much." Locke turned off the phone, unwilling to take the chance Jade would call back. He slid it into his pocket, and pulled his gloves onto his numbed fingers. "Whoever was here came prepared. They used tools. Torches. Ratchets. They knew what they were going to do before they got here."

"Seems like you have, what? Two percent arranged?"

"I'm only guessing. And you?" Locke asked.

"Not much. That thing has been parked here for a long time. The inside is full of nothing but snow. Everything is torn out."

"I noticed you jumped up in the back." Locke pointed to where Hiss climbed aboard.

"Yes, I did. I believe the vehicle was built to carry something."

"Maybe this." Locke kicked a part at his feet.

"I had the same idea."

The wind whipped between the two of them.

"Do you want to try to put more of this together?" Locke asked.

Hiss ignored the question. "Oh yeah, found this." Hiss tossed a WPS on the ground. "It was in the cab under the steering wheel. Found some cash frozen in the snow by the driver's side door, too."

Locke bent over and picked up the WPS. "How old is it?"

"I scanned it. About a year and a month," Hiss answered. "Batteries in those never last this long." Hiss turned the WPS over in Locke's gloved hand. "But the battery has been changed. You can tell by the backing."

The broken seal on the battery compartment revealed it had been opened.

"Huh. What do you think? Why would someone change it?" Locke handed it back.

“That is exactly why I am not going to go a step further in arranging any of these parts. This was a waste of our time.” Hiss stuck the WPS in his pocket and waddled toward the helicopter.

“You mean we came the whole way out here for nothing?” Locke yelled at his retreating partner.

Hiss stopped and spun around. “Where are we?” He yelled back. “In the middle of nowhere. The OWG barely has any presence out here. What better place to send a couple of Govicide Agents for no reason? Whoever is behind this knows if a WPS goes off we are going to follow it.”

A waste of time? Locke thought not. Somebody took the time to disassemble all this. That required planning. Travel time. Tools. Fighting the cold, wind, and snow. That was a lot to go through just to fool Govicide.

Maybe someone wanted them to believe they were on the wrong path when, in fact, this site was in line with all the others.

Two more steps and Hiss swung around the vehicle, out of sight. Locke figured he’d better follow. He examined the debris one more time, hoping to make sense of it all in a few quick seconds.

He regretted not having time of his own to study the vehicle. He’d have liked the chance to climb in and around like Hiss. To admire the engineering. To sit in the driver’s seat of a machine that large even if it didn’t work anymore.

Moreover, he wanted to discover the vehicle’s purpose. The OWG never built a vehicle without a purpose. There were no vehicles whose only purpose was to navigate the wilderness or anywhere outside the cities. And the OWG, at least to Locke’s knowledge, certainly didn’t build sixteen-wheeled vehicles whose only use was to traverse the tundra where no one lived.

The OWG’s mission in building vehicles concentrated on public transportation and the delivery of Goods and Services. Buses, trains, delivery trucks. All the automobiles Govicide used the OWG manufactured a long time ago before their production was unmandated. It wasn’t cost beneficial for subjects to drive their own vehicles, when all the time and energy put into manufacturing could be better served providing more Goods and Services. Given the choice between a car and medicine, subjects would always pick the latter. So, the OWG stopped making vehicles, and the Masses weren’t allowed to pursue making them on their own. Within five years of the mandate, the OWG eliminated and recycled all automobiles except Govicide’s.

But, the OWG promised all subjects would drive automobiles again. Soon.

Locke rounded the front of the vehicle, balancing himself with a glove-covered hand. The helicopter idled in front of him. The pilot waited inside, reading something. Hiss had almost reached it and didn’t seem to notice whether Locke kept up or not.

On a lark, Locke diverted to the driver’s side door of the mystery vehicle. Climbing the ladder, he gazed inside. The window on the door had been blown out. Glass shards littered the interior.

The interior was sparse and utilitarian. There were rows of buttons and switches on the dash and beside the driver’s seat. The seat couldn’t be called a seat now. Only a shell remained, with the metal frame and springs exposed. Whatever material covered the frame was long gone.

He tried to read the gauges. They were in a language or measurement he had never seen. He jiggled the handle of the door and tried to open it, wanting a closer look, but a sound came from behind him. A low whine started and rose in volume. The helicopter.

Locke turned to see Hiss in the copter waving his arms, urging Locke to hurry. He threw a glance at the instrument panel one more time, wondering why the gauges were not in the OWG language or measurement system. He leaped to the ground and raced across the snow.

Locke threw his body into his seat, slamming the door behind him.

“What were you doing?” The wrinkles on Hiss’ forehead undulated from straight lines to a series of “w’s.”

“I wanted to take a peek inside.” Locke answered between breaths. “You don’t see something like that every day. Did you see those gauges? The writing didn’t seem . . .”

Hiss interrupted. “They were probably faded from years of sitting out there.” Hiss gave him a “just trust me” look. “Part of the letters and numbers were missing. I saw it myself.”

The letters Locke saw on those gauges couldn’t have been OWG at one time. There were dots over some of them. Others looked backward.

“I don’t think so. Regardless, that thing . . .” Locke glanced at the rusted heap. “. . . isn’t something the OWG would make, is it?”

“Of course it is, Govicide Agent Locke. Just because vehicles like that are not built now does not mean they were not built at some time. Probably got banned when the Masses wanted more Goods and Services.”

“But those letters. No way they were OWG letters,” Locke argued.

“You know,” Hiss pointed, shaking his right hand, “I seem to remember reading somewhere that the OWG language used to have more letters until the Language Department cut it to twenty six.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” Locke laughed, but swallowed it when he saw Hiss’ face. The Agent was serious.

“I speak the truth, Govicide Agent Locke. They probably taught it before your time. No need to teach it now since there is nothing that old around anymore. Well, except for that machine.” Hiss jutted his chin at the vehicle.

OWG News, OWG music, OWG books, et cetera ceased being relevant after a certain period of time. The time period depended on the Exalted Ruler in charge. OWG Music composed by the OWG Musicians was here this year then deleted a year later. However, information on how the OWG got control of the chaos of the World would always be taught and never forgotten.

There were more than twenty-six letters in the original OWG alphabet? It sounded like a lie, but Locke knew the OWG Education Czar always tried to make the language easier for its students. Shortening the alphabet could do that.

The helicopter took off, gaining altitude, rising to fifty, then one hundred feet. Then the pilot steered toward the debris beneath. Creeping forward at an altitude of two hundred feet, the parts lay below. Locke pushed his head against the glass so he could peer straight down.

But his attention diverted to something else. The helicopter had passed over the far edge of the debris field when he thought he saw a mark in the snow. It was on the far side of the field, opposite the vehicle.

He sat upright in his seat to get a better view. He couldn't tell if what he saw was a large crack in the tundra formed by natural means, or subject made. It looked like an indentation.

They flew closer but rose in the air at the same time, at over 400 feet. Locke wanted the pilot to remain at this altitude but he wasn't sure if what he saw was remarkable. He waited until the helicopter hovered over the form.

In five seconds, it reached a point where Locke got his best view. He wasn't surprised.

The Symbol.

Three hundred feet long and at least two hundred feet wide, carved into the ice on the opposite side of the debris.

He smiled, feeling everything was right in the OWG. He missed the Symbol in the snow when they landed because he slept the whole way. He wished he'd stayed awake. If only he'd seen it before they landed, he would've been able to see it close up.

Standing on the ground--even in the middle, Locke doubted he would've noticed the depression. He wouldn't have been able to tell what it was by just seeing a small part. Someone had dug trenches to create it.

Locke tapped Hiss on the arm, pointing to the Symbol getting farther away. "Look. Look."

"What?"

"Do you see it?"

Hiss squinted in the direction of the Symbol but his blank facial expression told Locke he saw nothing. "See what?"

"The upside down U." Locke touched the side window with his finger.

"What are you pointing at?"

"The upside down U in the snow."

"I see something down there. You mean the indentation in the ground?"

"Yeah. It's subjectmade! It's--"

Hiss interrupted. "Subjectmade? Govicide Agent Locke, that is a simple indentation in the ground. The tundra is hundreds of feet thick. It was probably caused by a deep crack."

Locke shook his head. "I'm telling you. Whoever was out here made it."

The Symbol had nearly disappeared from view. The helicopter picked up speed and altitude. Soon the entire scene on the tundra vanished: parts, vehicles, Symbol, everything.

"I think the cold has gotten to your brain, Govicide Agent Locke." Hiss slid back to his side.

Locke wanted the pilot to turn around, but Hiss wouldn't allow it. And the pilot would listen to Hiss due to seniority. The raucous sound of the rotors filled Locke's ears. He hunched over, elbows on knees. He felt desperate for Hiss to see the Symbol. But he had to do it in a natural way so it wouldn't lead back to the envelope.

The Symbol . . .

With Hiss sneaking up on him during the phone call and everything that transpired since, Locke had forgotten what Jade said.

The Symbol was a graph?

No. Hamilton said the Symbol had a meaning. Something that everyone who was like Hamilton could see and think the same thing.

How would a graph do that? A graph was just a mathematical representation of a given set of units. X and Y . Sine and Cosine. Ninety Degrees. One hundred eighty degrees. Three hundred sixty degrees.

Locke shook his head. Mathematical symbols didn't excite or motivate subjects.

No, Jade was wrong. She deserved some credit, though. The idea was better than anything he'd thought of yet.

CHAPTER 29

A half-hour after landing, the two Agents entered the hotel lobby, stomping the snow off their shoes on a rubber mat. Locke anticipated getting a massaging--but predictably lukewarm--shower and a scorching cup of OWG coffee, getting some good rest and flying back to Gambling City tomorrow. He couldn't wait to talk to Jade about her graph idea. Granted, he'd dismissed it, but he wanted to hear why she'd thought of a graph in the first place.

Hiss remained in the lobby, wanting to catch a drink at the OWG Bar. Locke left him there and with weary legs climbed the flights of stairs to his room, the room with the terrible view. Before parting, they agreed to meet at seven the next morning for the ride to the airport.

Reaching his floor, he made the long trek to his room. He unbuttoned his jacket and took off his gloves. Next came his hat, leaving his hair in a matted mess. Unlocking the door, he pushed it open.

The carpet of the room was a dark brown, and a lighter color at his feet caught his eye. Another envelope. Slid under his door, just like the first one.

Locke backed out of the room and checked the hall. He held his breath to hear better. The door was on a spring so he propped it open with his foot and tried to sense anybody else on the floor.

Seeing and hearing nothing, Locke picked up the envelope, an exact copy of the one in Dale City. White. Eight by eleven inches. With the familiar Symbol front and center, glaring at him.

This was it. The first mentioned Jade's pregnancy. This one would be a request to do something against the mandates of the OWG. He was positive they'd blackmail him with this letter.

But, Hamilton said blackmail wasn't their style.

He flipped on the light. Ripping the envelope wide, he pulled the sheet out.

Before he even read the message, he noted the handwriting appeared the same.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, did you know someone with your last name was famous?

The smells, the sounds, and the feelings of the Hamilton interrogation arose in Locke's mind. He remembered Hamilton spelling his last name: L-O-C-K-E. Each letter had a distinct punch. Locke took it for a lie before. Now, he wasn't so sure.

He doubted the truth of the message because he knew no other Locke's except his ancestors going back fifty years. And none of them were famous.

His great grandparents weren't well known and to Locke's knowledge, left no definitive impression on anyone. He didn't even know what they looked like.

His grandparents weren't subjects of note, either. They were in their twenties when the OWG formed, having survived the anarchy. They died before he was born.

Similarly, Locke's parents were average subjects and came nowhere near being famous. Only subjects in the highest ranks of the OWG were well known. Like the

Exalted Ruler. Or the Govicide Directors. Or the wise males who formed the OWG. It wasn't possible to be famous or remembered for any other reason.

Maybe Hamilton and this note referred to his cousins.

But Locke didn't know any of them. They were out there, but the OWG considered trying to contact them a waste of time. All the Masses needed were the OWG and their boycomrade or girlcomrade. Outside of that, the OWG dismissed communication with extended family. Locke saw through his Homicide work, though, when a family member died, somehow the entire family found out. The OWG tried to suppress this kind of communication. If the OWG could do that, Homicide would be shut down for good since it existed for the sole reason to keep the Masses tranquil. No upset family members, no need to investigate anything.

But, a cousin wouldn't be an ancestor. It must be like an uncle or aunt. But, Locke never met any of them and didn't even know their names.

Still, as much as he tried to convince himself otherwise, and though he had no proof, Locke believed the message. So far, in his dealings with Hamilton, the murderer had been truthful. Cryptic. But truthful. Paradoxical. But truthful. Evasive. But truthful.

Ways existed to research the note but they were tricky. A Govicide Agent might get away with searching for someone by their last name without being asked questions. But for his own last name? It wouldn't be as easy as it had been to review Hamilton's crime scene pictures. That was explainable. Researching his last name wasn't.

Locke pulled out a chair from the table and sat. The thought of taking a nice hot shower felt distant as Gambling City. His mind focused on how he'd prove or disprove this message.

What would he do if he were in this same situation in Gambling City? If he needed to find something out but couldn't use a computer, what would he do?

He would go to the OWG Library. It didn't have as much information but a Govicide Agent would be able to peruse books without being traced--a privilege exclusive to Govicide Agents. What the Masses read at any OWG Library in the World was tracked but the paperwork piled up. For this reason, the OWG Firemen torched libraries every day. Soon, the Masses would only be able to read books online. With the System's permission, of course.

Did Snow City have a Library? Or had it been burnt down already?

He opened the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out the telephone book. He found the listing for libraries. There was only one. The address was 801 Nero Street.

At the front of the book, he found a map of Snow City. The library was only two and a half miles away.

Two and a half miles? That wasn't so bad. He'd be back in no time. He sprang from his chair, reaching for his phone. Just as quickly, he fell into it again. He couldn't call the limousine for this trip. All limousines were tracked, like his automobile. And this wasn't a mandated trip. This would be for him, and no one else.

He'd have to walk. Locke shivered at the thought.

But it could wait. He would arrive in warm Gambling City this time tomorrow. He remembered the OWG Fire Department scheduled its library for burning but the ceremony wasn't for another month. And it was just a five-mile walk from his living quarters.

The decision relaxed his mind, and he kicked his feet up on the table. He decided on a shower and a room service meal, a privilege the Masses never received. He put the telephone book away and grabbed the special menu designed just for Govicide and scanned the selections.

His phone rang. It was Hiss.

Locked answered, "Hello, Govicide Agent Hiss."

"I have new information." Hiss sneezed between words. "We are going to be on the road for a while."

"What?" Locke jerked upright.

"Places are popping up all over the World. Got a call from Headquarters."

"Where do they want us to go now?" Locke felt like pounding his head against the wall outside his window.

"We are going to head south to some place called, let me see, I think it is another place way out in the middle of nowhere. But, the SST is flying us to . . ." Hiss sounded like he was reading. ". . . Jongil City first. Then we are heading west right across the continent. Red Star City. And a few others. We will continue across the continent and our last stop is Francoville."

Locke did some quick calculations in his head. All those different destinations meant he wouldn't return to Gambling City for several days.

He needed to find out what this Messenger meant about his name. He needed to get more information from Hamilton. He needed to talk to Jade about her graph idea. He needed to see if she looked pregnant.

"Govicide Agent Locke? Govicide Agent Locke? Are you there?" Hiss yelled into the phone.

"Yes. Yes, I'm here." Locke pulled the phone away from his ear for a second. "Must be a bad connection."

"So we are going to be gone at least--"

Locke interrupted, "Several days. Yeah, I know."

"It is part of the work for the One World Government. Might as well get used to it. But it sounds like these leads will take us somewhere."

The only subject who got anything out of these trips was Locke. And he wasn't even supposed to know the information he did. He needed to get to Gambling City.

Locke couldn't hide his frustration. "Well, I hope so. I feel like we haven't gotten any closer to catching these criminals. Finding where they are. Finding out what they're doing with the cash."

"We will. We will. Trust me." Hiss sounded like he was short of breaths.

"Are we meeting at the same time tomorrow?"

"Yes, the limousine will pick us up."

"Okay. I'll be there." Locke threw his phone on the bed.

His decision was made. No matter how cold. How windy. How terrible. He needed to get to the library tonight. His curiosity would never allow him to wait a week.

The library might be locked, but he'd break in if he had to. Who knew how many books it held, but he'd find the correct ones. He'd take the risk of getting caught because it was worth it to discover the truth. He wouldn't wait until he got to Gambling City to figure these puzzles out. The Symbol. His last name. The vehicle on the tundra.

Retrieving the phonebook from the drawer, Locke memorized the route. It would be the toughest walk of his life.

Bundling up tight, he left his room, not bothering to shut off the lights. He left his phone because he didn't want temptation to use it if he got into a bind. He took the envelope and letter with him.

Locke found a back door to exit so the night clerk wouldn't see him. The door opened to a narrow alley. The wind blew from left to right and the width of the narrow street caused a funnel effect.

He went with the wind. The moving air plastered his long jacket against his back and his pants became pasted against his thighs and calves. In a few moments, he stood on the main street where the wind let up a bit, but not much.

The next half hour consisted of fighting the elements and fighting his thoughts. Both were predictable but formidable. Both were manageable but unyielding. But the temperature was cold, the coldest he ever felt. His thoughts blazed, the hottest he ever felt.

Making the first left, he swiveled into the wind. He found himself moving half as fast, though his effort doubled. He leaned forward to gain leverage.

He passed two, wrecked OWG busses covered in snow. Their cabs were demolished. Images of his father pulsed through his mind. No one had bothered to clean them off the streets. Probably cost too many credits.

Passing a park, he noticed three frozen bodies in the underbrush. They must have been banished from the OWG for one reason or another. No one ever froze to death in the OWG otherwise. Their deaths would make Goods and Services available for others. This is how he and Jade would die, he suspected, if their pregnancy were discovered. A strident reminder of why he needed to find a way of their jam.

A few times subjects appeared up ahead and he darted into the shadows. Yes, he was an Agent and the subjects would keep their mouths shut if ordered. But, why take the chance? Locke had told enough lies as it was. Staying out of sight would be easier than once again keeping track of another lie.

He anticipated no issues with alarms at the library. Maybe if he were in a bigger city. But not here. The only issue would be finding what he was actually looking for.

Not quite soon enough, the library appeared on his left.

It was a brick building with pillars in front. He didn't approach the front door. Instead he slipped around to the side. When he left the main street, the lights faded to the point where he relied on the white snow to show the path.

The windows of the library were low enough that he could peer inside by standing on the tips of his toes. He couldn't make out a shelf, a book, or a table. Nothing. He regretted not bringing a flashlight.

After thinking for a minute, he took off his hat and clenched it in his fist. Before striking the glass, he rushed out to the street to make sure no one was coming.

Hurrying to the window, he began to feel how cold his head had already become. A few more minutes and his hatless head might become an ice cube. He couldn't waste another second.

Getting on his tiptoes again, with a hard, short punch, he shattered one of the eight-inch by ten-inch panes. The sound pierced the darkness, but the wind kept the volume to a minimum.

He pulled himself into a chin-up, and found the lock on the inside, managing to unlatch it. Easing himself to the ground, he pushed the window up enough to haul his body over the sill. He landed, sprawling onto the wood floor. His eyes were open, but he could see nothing. Scuffling to get on his feet, he banged his knee against an invisible chair.

With small steps, he prowled to the nearest wall. He hoped to find a light switch. But, an overhead light would be too bright. His haste in leaving the hotel without a small light now came back to bite him.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, the fuzzy outline of desks in the middle of the room gave him an idea. He felt his way over to one of the desks. A lamp switch. Flipping it, a small light came on.

The dim light would be enough for him to accomplish his task.

The room he broke into was large, larger than he anticipated. Fifty feet across and over eighty feet long.

Over the next half hour, he went through all the topics in this area of the library, carrying random books back to the desk. OWG Biology, OWG Psychology, OWG Technology, OWG Communications. He pulled out random books, searching the index for the name Locke. He saw the name nowhere.

After those subjects, he crossed the library floor to other sections. OWG History, OWG Reference, OWG Economics, and OWG Music. He found nothing. Not one reference to someone with the last name Locke anywhere.

He found the vast expanses of shelf space odd. Most of them were empty. It seemed the OWG built the library much bigger than needed.

The image of his footprints in the snow popped into his mind. Then, he remembered the Gambling City streets. The airport. The empty buildings.

And now a library with much more shelf space than books.

Locke slammed the cover of the last book shut. He thought about continuing to browse through more pages but he figured it wouldn't help. He'd chosen a wide range of books in which to search. If he'd kept to one section he could've understood why his name didn't appear.

The line of thinking brought about another good question: what exactly did he want to know about this other subject with the last name, Locke? He didn't even know if it was a male or female.

That idea brought its own perils, though. If Hamilton and his crew knew such a subject, this other Locke couldn't have been someone in good standing with the OWG. If it were true, it could seriously affect his Govicide status.

What would get him in more trouble: Jade's pregnancy or an Offender who shared his last name? Neither was good.

Sweating, he loosened his jacket. He'd dressed for single digit temperatures and the library's hovered somewhere around sixty degrees. He left the window open for a quick escape but it didn't change the inside temperature much.

If the books didn't have anyone named Locke in them, he'd never find the answer. Computer use was risky and would bring up too many questions. Looking for a particular name, especially if the subject had been an Offender, would raise all sorts of red flags.

The thought of the long journey to the hotel made him shake. Returning with no new information made him shake even more.

Locke zipped his jacket. Just before he turned off the light, he stopped. Why not check out what Jade said about the Symbol? Her idea was probably way off base, but he while he was there why not check it out?

Using the same search pattern, he checked the books' indexes for anything with the word, "graph."

He found many. And more than he expected appeared similar to the Symbol. Maybe Jade's idea wasn't so outlandish.

But something bothered him. The different books were filled with graphs. But, when he covered up the labels to each of them they all looked the same. With no labels to say what the graphs detailed, they could mean anything.

He learned from the books that all of these types of graphs followed something known as a "bell curve," called that because they resembled the outline of a bell. He took out the envelope from the latest message.

The Symbol was similar to the drawing of a bell. Those Symbols in Gambling City. The Symbol tacked on that telephone pole. The large one made in the snow.

But there was a slight difference between the ones he saw in these books and the drawing on the envelopes. The difference was subtle, but it was enough to cause Locke to have some doubts. The Symbol's ends stayed straight. On all the ones he saw in these books, the ends came up and curved away from each other. In the graphs, this meant the values went out to infinity. The ends of the Symbols didn't appear to stretch to infinity. They had a definite end.

The more he compared the drawing to the graphs the more he decided it was not the drawing of a bell. And not a graph either.

Frustrated, Locke slammed the last book shut . . . again.

He returned all of them to their shelves and folded the envelope, putting it back in his jacket. Before shutting off the light, he spotted his wet footprints around the library.

Footprints in the snow. Footprints in the library.

Footprints all over the World.

CHAPTER 30

Locke climbed out the window and shut it when he got to the ground. The weather was even colder and windier now. Looking both ways before crossing, he began his walk. Snowdrifts were piled on the sides of the street, the tops blowing away like sea spray, fine enough to see right through it.

A walk taking a half hour before lasted over forty minutes upon return. The wind sapped his strength. It was a double dose. The wind blew stronger, making his walk longer. Which, in turn, made him colder, which made him more tired. By the time he reached the rear door of the hotel he needed every muscle to pull it open.

The air rushing through the alley created a vacuum effect, sealing the entrance shut. Putting both hands on the door handle and pressing one leg against the wall, he managed to pry it open wide enough to get a foot in. Inch by inch, a crack widened to where his whole body fit through.

He fell onto the floor as the door banged shut behind him.

Picking himself up, he brushed his shoulders and stomped his feet to shake off the snow. He felt the warmth of the hotel seep into him.

Between wipes, a sound down the hall caused his calves to tighten.

Footsteps.

He saw nowhere to hide. He could turn around, out into the cold. Yet, there wouldn't be enough time to run through the alley and into the street without being seen.

Wait a minute. He was a Govicide Agent. He didn't have to explain himself. Instead of running or trying to hide, Locke waited for the footsteps.

The first subject to appear around the corner was the night clerk, appearing as if he was ready to yell. But seeing it was a Govicide Agent, the clerk saved his breath. But, the subject behind him did not.

Hiss.

"Govicide Agent Locke, what are you doing?" The Agent's glare pierced Locke's eyes then crawled up and down Locke's frozen body.

Locke's confidence disappeared as quickly as the cold air. He hesitated. Seconds passed. The silence was awkward, but he knew his facial expression made the situation worse.

"Govicide Agent Locke, I asked you a question." Louder this time.

Locke's eyes shifted from his partner to the clerk. The clerk, biracial but darker than Jade, was an old subject like Hiss. He was much skinnier with more wrinkles. His wire rim glasses sat down far on his nose. He peered over them in a condescending manner. No subject gazed upon a Govicide Agent like that. But it gave Locke an idea that might give him time to collect his thoughts.

"What are you looking at?" Locke shouted at the clerk, taking a menacing step toward him.

The clerk backed up, "I, I--"

The old male, glanced at Hiss, then did double time out of there. Hiss seemed amused by the clerk's rapid departure, nodding and smiling. But his demeanor changed as he snapped his attention back to Locke.

"Where were you?"

What do I say? What do I say? What do I say? Locke's mind scrambled for a shred of an excuse.

"I went out for a walk."

"A walk? In this weather?"

"Yeah. Needed to clear my head." Locke peeled off his gloves, not looking at Hiss. What was he doing up this late anyway?

"How long were you out there?"

"Not long. How did you know I was here?" Locke glanced up for a second then tore his hat from his head. On the outside he tried to seem nonchalant. Fortunately, the three layers of clothing disguised his shaking body.

Hiss ignored Locke's question. "Where were you?"

Confronted with the question, it seemed less likely he could lie to Hiss. Locke stalled for time.

"What are you doing awake at this hour, Govicide Agent Hiss?" Locke ignored Hiss' question in return.

"I asked you first. Where were you?"

"I took a walk . . ." Locke let the words hang there for a second to watch Hiss' reaction. Here went nothing. ". . . to the library."

"To the library?" Locke's partner folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

"Yeah. I couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts going on up here." Locke pointed to his head.

"The library should be closed at this hour."

"I broke in."

The ease with which the answer came out of his mouth surprised Locke. Not that break-ins were a huge issue. The only reason the OWG even investigated break-ins was the fear of Goods getting in other subjects' hands. And this kept subjects from going through the proper OWG channels to acquire Goods and Services.

"Broke in?" Hiss stepped back, his brow furrowing.

"Yeah. You can go check. I smashed one of the side windows to get in."

"And what were you looking for?"

Locke's mind zoomed through excuses until he found a plausible reason. "Seeing that vehicle and all those parts bothered me. I wanted to check the library to see what it was."

No way would Hiss would determine what books Locke searched in the library. Even if Hiss went over there immediately, there would be no trace of what books Locke searched. All Hiss would be able to prove was that Locke indeed had been there, not what he read.

"Why not take the limousine?"

Good question. "The limousine? Well . . . I thought the driver was probably sleeping by now. Didn't want to bother him." Locke climbed up the two steps to where Hiss stood.

"So, you froze out there?"

"I needed to know. Just trying to do the best work I can for the OWG."

“What did you discover?”

“Nothing. Not one reference or picture. Nothing about that vehicle anywhere.”

It was an astute answer. Even if Hiss felt like going over there to check Locke’s story and found something about the vehicle, Locke could always claim he happened to miss it.

“Huh.” Hiss took out his handkerchief to wipe his face. Even in this cold climate, his pores worked overtime.

“And what were you doing here? Shouldn’t an old subject like you be in bed or something?” He tried to make a joke of it.

“I was in bed when the clerk called me. The alarm for this door went off when someone opened it. I tried calling you, but now we know why you did not come down to the lobby. You were the one who set off the alarm.”

The two walked down the hall, reaching the stairs. Locke climbed ahead and Hiss lagged behind.

Locke reached the first landing. “I wasn’t aware the door had an alarm. I should have gone out the front door.”

“Yes, you should have. I was conversing with the clerk about the perfection of the One World Government. Then, the alarm went off again and there you were.”

Hiss said good night, closing his door behind him.

When the latch clicked, Locke collapsed against the wall. Another catastrophe avoided. But another lie told. Not just one. Multiples.

No envelope awaited him on the floor when Locke secured himself in his own room. He fell onto his bed, stomach first.

Locke was lucky, and he knew it. He hadn’t wanted to get caught sneaking out of the hotel and sneaking back in. But, he managed to fabricate a plausible reason, and in the nick of time. He played it just right. Just on the fine edge of believability.

Twice in the last few days he avoided getting caught doing something he shouldn’t. Why was he taking these chances?

Because he was doing it for himself.

This was the most anti-OWG thought he’d ever had.

And, he realized he wasn’t willing to do the same for Govicide.

He couldn’t avoid it any longer.

Though he was willing to do a lot to protect the OWG, the System, and Govicide, he was willing to do almost anything to figure out Hamilton and all his mysteries. The Symbol. The Pyramids. The letters.

Would he have journeyed a half-hour in the snow and wind to a library for Govicide to figure out the purpose of the vehicle? No. And neither would Hiss.

But, he almost froze to death trying to figure out if there had been somebody famous in OWG history that shared his last name.

And what about the Symbol? All he’d done so far to figure out what it meant. It was relevant to their investigation. But Locke wasn’t doing it for the OWG, even though it was Govicide’s work.

He was doing it for himself. He covered his open mouth, in awe of the conclusion.

But, this was a problem. A subject’s own motivation could cause trouble. Subjects served the OWG and nothing else. In return, the OWG gave the Masses everything they needed to survive. It was an equal and fair relationship.

But, if the relationship was truly fair and equal, why did he feel satisfaction about straying outside the boundaries?

Locke rolled over and lay on his back. He couldn't deny the truth any longer: What he was doing was wrong.

It bothered him, but not to the point of changing his direction. He'd gone past the point of caring. But he still cared about not getting caught.

But, he couldn't continue in the OWG this way. Sooner or later, he'd make a mistake. Either that, or Jade's pregnancy would start to show. Then they'd both be captured.

But, could he change? Could he forget all he knew? Could he pretend the Symbol meant nothing? Could he imagine he never got the letters at his hotel rooms?

Hamilton. Cash warehouses. Vehicles in the middle of nowhere. Sites with fences surrounding them in remote places. Roads where nobody drove. Buildings where no one lived. Vast areas of undisturbed land, yet the OWG insisted the World was overpopulated.

It was not like Locke didn't believe everything was perfect. In fact, that was one of the OWG's goals: To perfect subjects. As long as subjects were imperfect, the World would be imperfect. Yes, the OWG was perfect. But, it was perfect because it cared for its imperfect subjects. The OWG wanted everyone to have everything. So, it could never be wrong.

Did he just quote Hamilton?

People have no rights if the One World Government is never wrong.

Locke rolled over to stare out the window.

If the OWG gave everything to the Masses, how could the Masses lack something? Food, electricity, water, housing, healthcare, entertainment. All thanks to the OWG. Then, how could it keep the Masses from having . . . something?

But Hamilton sounded like this "rights" thing was important. He could've yelled anything while in the Homicide hallway, but he chose to yell those words. And Locke knew Hamilton never said anything without deliberate intention.

Locke studied the cracks in the brick wall next door while feeling cracks forming in his belief system.

If "rights" were known, would everything make sense? Or, if "rights" were known, would everything make even less sense?

What if the OWG didn't want subjects to know what rights were?

Locke's head hurt, a sign of un-mandated thoughts. The OWG Doctors told everyone that subjects experienced fewer headaches if they excised un-mandated beliefs. In addition, his left arm fell asleep from lying on top of it, so he rolled again onto his back. He shook the arm a few times to get the circulation going again. The pins and needles dissipated.

He wanted answers.

But, how far would he go?

The only clear answer?

He was willing to do more for himself than he was willing to do for the OWG.

CHAPTER 31

The SST landed in Jongil City in less than an hour. The weather was a bit warmer than Snow City, by at least thirty degrees. But what the City had in nice weather, it lacked in scenery.

Most buildings were on the verge of collapse, their wooden frames sagging under years of wear. Weeds and trees grew over the old roads. Even the newer buildings had all their windows punctured. Fallen trees made the driver take detours.

On this first visit a year ago, the Govicide Agents told Locke this place had been evacuated almost thirty years ago. Over the course of months with trucks and boats and a few planes, the OWG moved the Masses to the other continents, closer to the distribution network. To make the move easier, the OWG instructed them to leave all their belongings behind. They would receive new goods when they reached their destinations. The Agents added that many subjects were killed during the move by rough seas, plane crashes, and hurricanes.

The trip into the mountains outside Jongil City took three hours. Along the way they passed a succession of ridges separated by narrow valleys. Snow topped some of the mountain peaks that went in and out of sight as the limousine wound its way through the switchbacks. Much like the tundra from the day before, this area was barren, like humans had never stepped on this land.

The limousine stopped in front of a concrete tunnel, penetrating deep into a mountain. This was not a tunnel for vehicles, though. It had no exit. Someone had recently found the cash inside. Hiss asked how the site had been found. The driver claimed he didn't know since he lived elsewhere.

Inside this tunnel, a network of small hallways broke off in different directions. Offices, storage areas, laboratories--all sheltered under thousands of tons of rock. Even if he took the whole day, Locke wouldn't be able to investigate it all. At some time, subjects worked for the OWG here. What their work was, neither Agent knew.

True to Hiss' report, they found the green bills deep inside. The green color appeared in front of their flashlights like a rodent at night. Like Cornville and Snow City, the cash was spread out as if somebody couldn't take all of it. While Hiss examined the cash, Locke scoured the cave for the Symbol. He didn't find one, whipping a few pebbles against the cave walls. Maybe he wasn't searching hard enough.

"This cash is from Red Star City," Hiss said after a few minutes.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. See this WPS? The battery is dead but I recognize it as the kind we use in Red Star City." Hiss showed it to Locke then shoved it in his pocket.

After rummaging around for another half hour, they found a clue, several metal parts similar to the ones on the tundra. "You had a good look at those parts. What do you think? Are they the same?" Hiss asked.

Locke knelt on the gravel floor, picking up a curved part, "Kind of. This piece is similar to the pieces at Snow City except it's smaller. Maybe part of a cylinder. See how it's curved?"

“Grab what you can.” Hiss ordered. “We will take them to town in the limo.”

Locke carried the parts out to the limousine, putting the smaller ones in the passenger area and the rest in the trunk. Hiss carried none.

As they pulled away, Locke looked up at the hillside above the tunnel.

A Symbol stared down at him.

Not huge like the one on the tundra, but it was large. Fifty feet by forty feet. Someone constructed it out of rocks littered across the mountainside. They placed the rocks about a foot apart to form the hump. But, the Symbol was out of sight before he had a chance to alert Hiss. His partner would’ve dismissed it as a natural formation anyway.

On the road into the city, they passed rows and rows of empty living quarters. All built in the exact same dimensions. No electrical lines ran to any of them. He pointed this out to Hiss who believed the OWG took the electrical lines with them to save materials.

That night, the Agents stayed in a trailer, since no hotels existed in Jongil City. The trailer sat in the vicinity in case Govicide Agents came into the area. It consisted of a bus with living accommodations inside. Three couches, tables, a television, and two bedrooms. Hiss picked the bedroom at the far back of the trailer. Locke was left with the one closer to the front.

When Locke got settled in his room, he called Jade. There was so much he wanted to say, but Govicide guidelines were clear. He informed her that he wouldn’t be home for a while. Maybe a week. The silence on the other end told Locke all he needed to know about Jade’s feelings about it. After a few seconds, she perked up and blurted with robotic precision what was expected in such circumstances, “The OWG is going to be so much more perfect because of your work.” She had no choice. Complaining about a Govicide Agent’s work schedule could get a subject in trouble, even if the subject was an Agent’s girlcomrade.

Locke, frustrated by the OWG phone limitations, felt like the conversation was going nowhere. Jade must’ve felt the same way since she didn’t put up much of a fight when he said he’d better go.

After the conversation ended, the driver brought dinner. Hiss and he both enjoyed steak cooked by one of OWG’s finest chefs, who had come along with the driver and the limousine on a cargo plane. Nothing but the best for Govicide Agents.

Locke slept well, climbing out of bed shortly after six in the morning to go to the bathroom. While Hiss’ bathroom connected to his room, Locke’s was at the front. It was no bigger than a phone booth and reminded him of the bathroom on the SST.

He shut the door behind him and the light came on. And there on the sink sat another envelope. He wasn’t even surprised. He almost expected the messages at this point. If Hamilton’s comrades were in Snow City, of course they could be here in Jongil City. He tore the flap, his eyes not wavering from the hand-drawn Symbol.

Once again, another single sheet of paper.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, this is where the future is headed.

Locke read the message a few times. Headed for what?

Standing at the toilet, he squinted out through the tiny window. A male standing in the bathroom could urinate while admiring the landscape outside. The window was far enough off the ground that no one could look in.

The trailer sat on a street by a park. In the distance, Locke saw a building, similar to Govicide Headquarters, but much smaller. Forty years ago, he pictured the structure being the centerpiece of the city. Only a shell remained. Walls and a roof, nothing else.

A dirt and gravel street, as crude as the evacuated building, separated the trailer from the building's grounds. He glanced at the letter sitting on the sink.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, this is where the future is headed.

He looked outside again. The building. He read the note. He looked outside. The streets. He read the note. He looked outside, remembering those rows of buildings on the edge of the city. Back and forth his attention alternated between the view and the letter.

He took the letter and envelope to his room, locking the door so Hiss wouldn't peek in unannounced.

Opening the blinds, he continued thinking.

He saw a wasteland.

Could this letter mean this environment was where the World was headed?

Locke shook his head. The OWG was providing everything for everyone. The future had no choice but be better.

But, what if Hamilton and his comrades had their way?

If they were truly Free Enterprisers, then the future would be the scene Locke saw outside his trailer. Like the fables said: Free Enterprisers destroy everything.

But, Hamilton was high tech, at least as high tech as the OWG. Hamilton was in perfect health. He had the ability to travel the World. And, this outside environment looked the opposite of perfect.

Why would Hamilton's comrades want to make the future worse if they lived so well now?

Hamilton knew the meaning of this message. But would he tell Locke the truth and admit his plans were to take the World back to anarchy?

No, he wouldn't do that. But Locke anticipated asking Hamilton anyway.

He stuck the letter and envelope deep in his bag with the previous ones.

An hour later they were in the air on their short trip to Red Star City. OWG techs would be waiting for them to collect the parts from the mountain site.

Locke had no time to relax in his seat before the SST descended to their destination. Below him, he saw a city he remembered well. He recalled being able to smell the city from the ocean as he neared shore ten months ago.

The stench was a combination of OWG Food being cooked on open grills and industry from the stacks belching smoke. The OWG believed in good environmental policy, but not at the cost of producing Goods and Services. And this is where most manufacturing took place.

Everything from bicycles to forks, plates to wheels. All made here. OWG workers of all ages labored to make sure the Masses had everything they needed. Children from five years old up to subjects in their last years before elimination toiled twenty-four hours a day to make sure everyone got that to which they were entitled.

As the SST flew over the miles of factories, Locke thought how responsible the OWG was to teach youngsters good OWG work habits at such an early age. OWG children worried about two things: school and OWG work.

The thought of children brought Jade to his mind. He reminded himself, no matter how his curiosity took him off in different directions, he needed to solve this case. There could be no children in his or Jade's future.

The OWG techs met them and took the parts from Jongil City away. Hiss insisted they call him as soon as they learned something.

The limousine pulled up alongside a tanker roped to a Red Star dock. It had arrived two days ago. One of the sailors found cash on its deck. The ocean-goer was several hundred feet longer than the cruise ships Locke used for two years. Yet, all it held was the black liquid so important to the OWG: oil.

The captain, short with a large hat, led them aboard. His OWG language sounded rough, like he learned it a week ago. This was common with most of the subjects in this area.

"Gov'cide Agents," the captain bowed. "Happy have you here."

"And we are happy to be here, Captain Lee," Hiss answered. "Where is the cash?"

"Still on deck."

Through a series of heavy metal doors and stairs, Captain Lee led them up to the front of the ship.

"You have questioned the crew?" Hiss asked.

"Oh, yes, Gov'cide Agent. Oh, yes." The captain bowed again. "They know nothing."

"Did you whip them? Torture them to get some answers?" Hiss asked, his tone seeming to doubt the crews' innocence.

"No. Not yet."

"Govicide will take care of it." Hiss nodded, face hard as the ship's steel hull.

One more door and the three stood on the main deck. Locke strolled to a side railing and gazed down. The limousine was a speck in the distance.

"Cash over here. In oil." Captain Lee directed.

Beside one of the openings into the hold of the ship, a large, black patch dirtied the red deck.

"And there are no crew members missing?" Hiss continued his questioning.

"No, Govicide Agent. All here. They found cash two days ago. Sunrise. Ship in Middle Ocean when happened."

As the two talked, Locke listened, hanging onto the rail. "How much oil is missing?" he finally queried.

"Hard to say, Govicide Agent. Ship leak oil all time. Hundreds gallons a day. Hard to measure any taken."

"Leave us," Hiss commanded.

One more bow, and the Captain retreated to the inside of the ship.

"What do you think?" Locke asked.

Hiss raised a scraggly eyebrow, "The System registered no red flags. The ship did not stop on the way here. Whatever happened occurred while the ship was in motion."

The cash was soaked in oil, keeping it from blowing off the ship and into the water. Neither Agent touched the slimy mess.

Locke bent over. What was just a slight smell overwhelmed his nose when he got close. He recoiled. "They're one hundreds. But in this condition you'll never be able to tell where they're from."

“Yeah . . .” Hiss nodded, sounding like he’d just missed a meal.

After a walk to the bow and stern, they climbed down all ten flights to the dock. Their walk to the limousine took them along the side of the ship. As Locke admired the steel of this monstrosity, he noticed something at water level near the bow, sixty feet from the dock.

The Symbol—black and not well drawn. In fact, if he hadn’t seen all the others, he wasn’t sure it would have stuck out on the red hull of the ship. This provided him an opportunity. “Govicide Agent Hiss, see that?”

“What?” Hiss kept walking.

“On the bow.”

Hiss squinted. “That black thing? The ship must have rubbed against something.”

“No. That’s the Symbol for the subjects moving this cash. They’re all over the place.”

“Really? I have not seen any.” Hiss slid into the limo.

Locke blocked him closing his door. “I’m serious, Govicide Agent Hiss. This Symbol means something.”

“What? What does it mean?”

“I . . . I don’t know. But they’re everywhere. They’re all over Gambling City and--”

“I have never seen them. But, when you find out what they mean, let me know. Now, move your fingers before I shut the door on them.”

The door slammed, just missing Locke’s appendages. Solving this case before Jade’s pregnancy had just become more difficult than ever, as Hiss was becoming more of an obstacle. Dread wrapped itself around his throat and squeezed.

Four hours later, the SST touched down in Punjabburg. Locke recalled being stunned by the color of the subjects here. They weren’t white. They weren’t black. They were tan but not quite the color of Jade either.

Hamilton killed Govicide Agent Victor Fielek here nine months ago. Fielek was here investigating Offenders when poisoned.

The hour was too late to go to the site, so the limousine whisked them to their hotel.

With the rising of the sun, Locke woke up to another message under his door.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, our plan involves not taking over, but taking over.

“Great, another riddle. Why can’t they stick to straight forward messages like the first one?” Locke tossed the page across the room.

Regaining his composure a few moments later, he packed the note in his bag. Him putting the message away was not a sign that he’d lost interest in them. Very much the opposite. He liked getting them . . . as long as they said nothing about blackmail.

What they found in Punjabburg was nothing like Locke experienced before. First, like the ship, this seemed an outrageous place to find cash: inside an OWG tech facility. Yet, no one saw anything. The workers here programmed computer equipment, dealing with making the System more efficient and powerful.

It appeared nothing had been taken. Well, except the videos tapes recording everything going on at the facility. The cash was found in an out-of-the-way part of the building where few workers labored.

While Hiss surveyed every inch of the work area, Locke selected a few workers to question in a private office.

“So you saw nothing?” Locke asked.

“Nothing, Govicide Agent,” the older male answered.

“But, the cash was found fifteen feet from where you work for the OWG.”

“I never go over there. Not part of my work for the OWG.”

“But it’s only fifteen feet away!” Locke slammed the desk.

The worker cleared his throat, “Are you saying I should take time to go over there while I am supposed to be working for the OWG, Govicide Agent? There is no work to be done for the OWG in that area.”

“What I’m saying is it wouldn’t hurt to turn your head and notice something once in a while . . . Next!”

The worker left the office. A young female entered. She bowed.

“You sit right by the front door. Nobody goes past without you noticing.”

“Yes, Govicide Agent. Well, no, Govicide Agent.” she answered.

“Is your answer yes or no?”

“It means I see subjects pass by me but I do not look at them.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I do not see their faces.”

“You’re telling me you couldn’t identify one of the other workers here?” Locke asked, his voice cracking.

“No. Why would I? I work for the OWG. Not them. The OWG is everything. They are nothing. I owe everything to the OWG. Not them. I am sure all the other workers would say the same. Any time I spend observing them takes away from my time working for the OWG.”

An image of the busses sped through Locke, the riders’ heads down. “Then tell me. The System says you’ve been here a few years. Who should I ask about the cash? Who would be first on your list?”

“Everybody.”

“Everybody?” Locke cocked his head. “Why?”

“Because I am the most loyal OWG worker on the entire World, so everyone else must be less loyal. So, they must all be investigated.”

“You’re saying everyone else must be guilty of something against the OWG but you?”

“Yes.” Her answer sounded crisp with certainty.

“Next!”

The female exited. The next subject to enter was a young male in charge of the videotapes for the facility. Surely he had something to say. He bowed.

“What happened to the tapes?” Locke asked, nose to nose with him.

“They were taken.”

“I know that. Who took them? You?” Locke circled the worker, sensing weakness.

“Well, uh . . .”

“You did, didn’t you?” he whispered in the worker’s ear.

“Yes, I did. But . . .”

“And where did you get the cash?” Locke yelled.

He shrank from Locke. “I do not know anything about the cash.”

“You expect me to believe you had something to do with the tapes but nothing to do with the cash?” Even louder this time.

“You do not understand, Govicide Agent.”

Locke leaned on the corner of the desk. Much softer now, "Then, explain it to me."

"Well, uh, I watch OWG News all the time. You can check the System. It is the truth. And I see all the time how the One World Government is telling everyone to save energy because of the worldwide shortage. And I know how many of the buildings have shut down their video cameras, you know . . .the ones left over from the original system . . .so I decided I could help the OWG by shutting down ours, too."

As the male spoke, Locke remembered the first hotel with its non-working cameras.

The tape manager continued, tears overflowing like a plugged toilet. "They have been disconnected for years now. No tapes in them either, because the cameras were disconnected anyway. The Offenders did not take them because there were no tapes to take."

If this were a murder investigation, it was about the time Locke would punch a witness. Unlike his moments with Hamilton, Locke would have no problem delivering a few punches.

But he held back. Instead, Locke grabbed a pen and paper, and sketched the Symbol.

"Have you ever seen this?" He held it very close to the male's face.

"What is that?" the subject sniffled.

"For now, let's just call it an upside down U. Have you seen it?"

"I think so. Yes, I think so." The male straightened, seemingly happy he could finally assist Locke.

Locke's eyes opened wide. "You mean you didn't ignore them?"

"No. How could I? They are in the bathroom stalls."

"If you're telling me the truth, you'll get no credit deductions. But if you're lying, I don't need to tell you what will happen. And get those cameras working again." Locke scolded as he left the office.

The worker told the truth. Locke found the Symbols drawn in every stall, done with a sharp object. A knife maybe. He weighed showing Hiss, but the Agent would dismiss it as someone bored while going to the bathroom.

As he stood there, with the stall door closed, the bus image returned. How everyone had their heads down, not giving attention to anyone around them. Not talking to their fellow travelers.

Just like the workers in this facility.

How could two different types of subjects show the same behavior when thousands of miles separated them?

One side of him insisted the OWG caused this behavior, while the other side insisted it wasn't possible.

In the limousine, Hiss complained the whole way to the airport about the OWG workers. How they hadn't shown the two Agents enough respect. How he thought a few of them didn't bow low enough. How one of them wanted to touch the cash that was found.

"And what about you?" Hiss finally got around to asking.

"Offenders took the tapes," Locke lied. He could never turn in a subject who helped him find the Symbol. "What did you think about the workers not even recognizing each other?"

"Concentrating on their OWG work like they should. They should work as hard at showing us more respect . . ."

The SST flight that evening took them to Pak City. Another short flight. Hamilton hadn't murdered anyone here, so the area was new to Locke. The Masses here were very similar to the ones in Punjabburg. Dark-skinned with white features. Since night had fallen, they'd have to head to the mountains where the cash was found in the morning.

Locke anticipated an envelope the next morning. The timing was right. A different city, a different hotel, a new message.

But it got Locke to thinking as he relaxed in his Pak City hotel. How did the Messenger even know where Hiss and he were going? Govicide agent's movements were secret. The pilots were given the schedule on a day-to-day basis.

And how did the Messenger stay in step with them? A different one in every city? Maybe, but all of the messages had the same handwriting.

Were they written beforehand? And then sent out to the different cities somehow? That seemed like a lot of work.

But how?

The same way Hamilton traveled the World.

Hamilton must have used a plane. During those two years, Locke thought Hamilton used the same travel methods as Homicide. Boats, trains, and buses.

Now, Locke decided his premise was wrong. Hamilton used something a lot faster. And the only way to travel faster was by jet.

But, Govicide and a few select Departments were the only groups who had jet access.

And jets were tracked with radar. They had to take off from somewhere. They had to land somewhere. They needed fuel. Pilots. Maintenance.

In those terms, the possibility of a group other than the OWG having a jet was remote. Someone would notice a jet landing somewhere other than at the regular airports. A pilot couldn't safely land a plane in a field.

These mysteries could be solved with one simple action: Catch the Messenger.

Locke slept through the message deliveries so far. Not this time.

If he caught the delivery subject, he could find out how the Messenger moved from place to place. Who wrote the notes. What they planned.

And if he didn't cooperate, Locke could always turn him over to his superiors at Govicide.

But could he do that?

He wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 32

He waited, but it was tough. Locke paced his room, circling the table what seemed like a hundred times. He flipped on the OWG News. The main story was rising world temperatures. Sacrifices would be needed. Goods and Services would be reduced in response.

The clock passed 1am. Then 2am. Locke fell asleep in his chair. He awoke startled fifteen minutes later. No message yet.

He trudged to the bathroom, splashing cold water in his face. He settled back in his chair. Once again, it got too comfortable. He strode to his window. It overlooked the roof of another building. He examined the air conditioning units. They'd been manufactured in Red Star City by subjects half his age.

Worry nipped at him. What if no message got delivered?

Then, he'd be up all night. And the fatigue would show on his face and in his demeanor the next day. Hiss would wonder why he hadn't slept. And then Hiss would be suspicious.

Maybe this was a waste of time.

At 2:45am, he made a deal: He'd stay awake fifteen more minutes. Then he'd go to bed.

In five minutes, his anxiousness that the Messenger wouldn't deliver evaporated.

A shadow blocked the light from under the door. Every one of Locke's muscles contracted. Should he rush the door? Creep over?

This moment of indecision cost him. While he decided what to do, an enveloped slithered into the room.

This got him moving. The shadow darted away. He jumped up and sprinted to the door, but had trouble opening it, pulling the handle before taking a split second to turn it.

He jumped into the hallway, swiveling to where the shadow dispersed.

Nothing.

The hallway was about sixty feet long with a stairwell at each end. Locke heard movement on the nearest one. He dashed to it and looked down between the railings. Footsteps pitter-pattered below but he couldn't see who was there.

Locke flew down the stairs two at a time, sleepiness far behind him. In seconds, he landed on the fourth floor.

At the third floor landing, he paused to listen. No more sounds on the stairs. He opened the stairwell door to check the hallway. No one.

"Dang it." Locke pounded his fist against the railing.

He took the rest of the stairs like the others. On the bottom floor, the door opened into a hallway leading to the lobby. Locke jogged to the end of it. He saw or heard no one.

Peeking around the corner into the lobby, he noticed the night clerk sat at her counter, writing on a piece of paper.

Locke stepped out from the corner. "Anyone come through here just a few seconds ago?"

The clerk dropped her pen, bringing her left hand to her face. “No. No, Govicide Agent. No one has come through here in about an hour,” the clerk answered, bending to pick up her pen. Her hand shook as she placed it on the counter.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am sure, Govicide Agent.”

Locke took another step into the lobby. He noticed the video surveillance cameras. “Those work?”

“Oh, no, Govicide Agent. To use them would mean that we use too much energy. Energy that could go . . .”

“Yes, yes. I’ve heard it all before. Is there another way out of this hotel?”

“Of course, Govicide Agent. There are entrances and exits on all sides of the building.” The female pointed to her left then to her right.

Locke remembered Snow City. “Do they have alarms if they’re opened?”

“Sometimes they work. Sometimes they do not.”

“And none have gone off tonight?”

“No, Govicide Agent.” The clerk shook her head.

Could the Messenger be still in the building? Good luck trying to figure that one out. Even if he searched room to room, how would he recognize the Messenger when he saw him? He wouldn’t be wearing a shirt saying, *I am the Messenger*.

Locke’s prey could’ve scampered down one of the halls on the other floors, descended another stairwell, and been out an exit door by now. And in that case, a search of the hotel from top to bottom would wind up being fruitless.

Locke put his hands on his hips, hanging his head. How had he been outsmarted? He’d stayed up and still the subject evaded him.

Forcing a smile to reassure the clerk everything was fine, Locke stomped down the hall. He climbed the stairs, keeping an eye on the halls of the other floors. No one.

The door to his room hadn’t closed when he left. It had tried to shut but it didn’t have enough momentum to close. The bolt rested against the jamb. He opened it with his hip, grabbed the envelope and secured the door behind him.

“So, what do you have to tell me tonight?”

Same ink color. Same handwriting. Same Symbol.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, where there’s nothing, something will be.

Another riddle.

This Messenger refused to give him something he could go on.

But, he had neither the time nor the energy to mull over the message. It was time to get four hours of sleep. Four hours that surely wouldn’t be enough to refresh him.

Stripping off his clothes, Locke grabbed the covers on his bed. And froze.

Another envelope leaned against the pillows.

While he was in the lobby, the Messenger must’ve returned to Locke’s room and left another note.

This proved one thing: The Messenger was the writer.

He didn’t have to rip the envelope open because it wasn’t sealed. The Symbol was on the front, but not as neat as the others. The writing was more of a scrawl. But the handwriting was the same.

Hello Govicide Agent Locke, I’m used to getting away. You’re not used to chasing.

“No riddle this time,” Locke said out loud. He placed the message on the table.

If the Messenger carried a bag with envelopes and paper, he should be easy to pick out. But where to start? He wasn't sure who was in the hotel on this night but the building couldn't be more than half full.

If he got the hotel to empty out, he might be able to figure out the Messenger's identity.

No. He was too smart for that. Even if he stayed in the hotel, this little chase probably spooked him. He'd be gone. Locke dismissed looking at the registry, along with evacuating the hotel room by room. The Messenger had too much time to slip out.

And how would Locke explain it all to Hiss? That would be the toughest part of all. Once again, the conversation would lead directly to the first message in Dale City. Exactly where the conversation couldn't be allowed to go.

Locke decided to do nothing. Catching the Messenger in the act was the only way it would have worked. Anything else took too much time and subjectpower. And caused too many questions.

He did sense the irony. Here he was. In a hotel. In the middle of nowhere. Gambling City was some seven thousand miles away. And the writer of the letters had been a few feet outside his door and Locke couldn't catch him. The Messenger might be on this same floor--a few rooms away--and Locke couldn't prove it.

Locke lay on the bed without removing the covers. He closed his eyes. His last thought before falling off to sleep was how bizarre it would be if he got another note the next morning.

That thought still spun in his head four hours later when he woke to his alarm. His first action was to check the floor.

Nothing there.

But the new day gave him a new perspective.

Hamilton's comrade—the Messenger--could have waited for Locke in the room and attacked him when he returned. Perhaps Locke might've been the fifteenth Agent this group had killed in a little over two years. Yet, he decided to leave a note and escape with no violence.

What did that say about him? What did that say about their group?

Hamilton proved they could be dangerous. Yet, when given the chance to get rid of an Agent who tried to capture him, the Messenger didn't take the opportunity. Instead, he chose to leave a harmless message with a straightforward statement, and disappear.

Locke pondered this in the shower. He imagined coming back from the brief chase and being strangled from behind since he'd had his defenses down upon his return to the room. In thirty seconds, his life would've been over.

He would be more aware of his surroundings from now on.

The steam began to rise in the shower. Locke peered out through a crack in the curtain to see the mirror. The bathroom was getting as clouded as his mind.

Why hadn't the Messenger killed him? Locke had shown the desire to capture him. Locke had stayed awake for the expressed purpose of doing so. He'd pursued him down the hall and steps, and to the lobby.

And still the Messenger didn't feel the need to kill Locke.

He twisted around in the shower to allow the rapidly cooling water to hit the other side of his body.

Maybe Hamilton was their only murderer.

The Messenger was the Messenger. The subjects who printed the cash were just cash printers. The subjects who helped Hamilton and the Messenger from place to place were just transportation subjects. The subjects who were on the tundra outside of Snow City and in the tech facility were just tech subjects. They were simply subjects doing their work.

A civilization like the OWG.

Except they were trying to destroy the OWG.

But, were they?

It had been two years since Hamilton's first murder and the OWG was still here, working like always. The System hadn't been attacked. Hamilton was in jail. The cash was a problem, but what were these Offenders doing with it?

And, besides Hamilton's murders of the Agents, no damage had been done.

As the now cold water woke Locke, he estimated that if these subjects were Free Enterprisers, they were the most harmless ones he could imagine.

Free Enterprisers, according to OWG lore, were ruthless, violent in everything they did. Not caring if subjects got Goods and Services or not. Allowing subjects to starve and live out in the elements.

But, these subjects didn't seem to be like that at all.

Cash was out there, but not in any subject's hands. No complaints from subjects about not getting any Goods and Services in the areas where the cash was found. No subjects turning in other subjects for getting around OWG mandates in those areas either.

So, who exactly were these Free Enterprisers?

Maybe they weren't Free Enterprisers at all.

Moreover, where could this civilization be? The OWG was everywhere.

Locke finished his shower and met Hiss downstairs. The old Agent said little. It seemed this trip across the World from city to city, site to site, was having an effect on him. Locke noted there was less arguing and tension between the two of them since the Red Star City dock. He wanted to mark this up as them getting used to each other's tendencies and habits. But Locke also realized he hadn't done anything suspicious since the Snow City incident, either. He guessed if Hiss caught him doing something unusual again the tension would return.

Their trip by helicopter took them into the mountains around Pak City. They traveled over nothing but mountainous terrain. It maneuvered up and down, side to side. Locke felt some queasiness coming on from all the movement, and warned Hiss he might be sick. Hiss told him to concentrate on the horizon and not on every mountain they passed.

It worked. Although the sickness didn't vanish, following the Agent's advice made it start to dissipate.

Their destination was another cave. An OWG Environmental Protectionist, while surveying the area for signs of World Warming, found the cash on a dirt road several hundred feet below the cave. Hiss believed the wind blew the cash to this location. Locke disagreed, believing the cash was on the road because it was loaded there.

While Hiss canvassed the area for additional cash and clues, Locke did his own searching. Hiss spent his time inside the cave. Locke stayed outside, trying to find the Symbol.

Locke didn't see one. No rocks moved into the Symbol configuration. No carvings in any of the pine trees around the cave. No scrawling on the rocks just outside the cave. No Symbols etched into the dirt beside the road or on the way up to the cave.

In an hour, the two Agents met at the helicopter with Hiss still on the phone with someone. Locke hoped he'd see the Symbol somewhere on the mountainside. He continued to watch until the forested peak was out of sight.

If it was there, he missed it.

Hiss hung up and thrust the phone into his pocket. A long sigh from him signaled to Locke that the call wasn't good.

"Govicide Agent Hiss, is there something wrong?" Locke asked.

"No," Hiss answered, staring straight ahead.

Locke studied Hiss body language from the tips of his shiny black shoes to the top of his almost hairless head. Something was going on but Locke didn't get the idea it had anything to do with Pak City or any other city. It bothered Locke a bit but it didn't rise to the level of worry. If Hiss found out about Jade's pregnancy somehow, or the other information Locke knew, Hiss wouldn't have give him the one word answer. The topic bothering Hiss must be something else.

The helicopter landed and the limo whisked them to their awaiting SST. There would be no second night in Pak City. Their next destination was Francoville, quite a distance away on the far West side of the Third Continent.

Hiss took his former seat at the front of the SST. He hadn't sat in front since their trip from Dale City.

Locke tried to relax, and the flight attendants did their best in assisting his effort. They brought dinner consisting once again of food Locke heard about but never tried. This included crab legs, OWG fries, and cheesecake. It was his favorite meal yet, though he got a bit messy cracking the crab legs open.

Because of the length of the flight, entertainment was offered. The in-flight film choices consisted of OWG classics such as *The Seven Govicide Agents*, *Govicide Confidential*, *Govicide Beauty*, and *The Dark Agent*. Locke had seen them before, since they were all required viewing as a teenager. The OWG hadn't produced any films in recent years. Providing more Goods and Services got in the way, but there was talk the cameras might start rolling again soon.

Of these films, *The Dark Agent* was Locke's favorite, telling the story of an Agent fighting against a crazy Free Enterpriser who tried turning Big Apple City into anarchy. This Free Enterpriser painted his face white and red to conceal his identity. In the end, *The Dark Agent* captured the Free Enterpriser, hanging him upside down from a building, all the Free Enterpriser's cash falling out of his pockets.

But, Locke didn't enjoy the film as much as before. For the first time, he found himself sympathizing with the Free Enterpriser. He agreed with what the Dark Agent did, but there was something about the film this time. Maybe because he was an Agent now, and the film didn't portray Govicide life in the correct way. Or maybe because Big Apple City in the film looked attractive and alive with the Masses driving automobiles, riding in SST's, eating exotic foods, and living to at least eighty years old.

The film ended and Locke stared out his window. His view was to the south. The SST flew to the north of the area where Jade said OWG Transportation had so many problems. Rail sensors going out. SST's having navigation issues. SST's disappearing from radar.

In the seventh grade, OWG Educators taught that this area was the last to fall under the rule of the OWG. The OWG used weapons--Locke didn't know what kind since they were banned afterwards--to gain control. However, the lasting effects left the entire area uninhabitable.

Over the years, SST's gave it a wide berth. Trains traveled on the outskirts of this restricted area. Any closer and crews suffered death in a short time. The OWG deemed the three million square miles unlivable for hundreds of years.

He listened to the engines purr. Steady. Smooth. Straight. This SST didn't seem to have any navigation problems at all being so close to the area. Far off to the southwest were the Pyramids Hamilton mentioned.

The clear night gave him an unobstructed view of the moon. The peaceful sight made him sleepy. As he drifted off gazing down at this deserted area, his last coherent thought was: Did he see lights?

CHAPTER 33

Locke woke up to a jolt. At first, he feared he was about to be part of the next SST accident. But, it was just the pilot landing the SST.

Raising the window shade, he saw the reason for the shake. The wind blew trees to and fro outside the airport's perimeter. Rain splashed against the window as if the jet was getting a shower. The SST slowed on the runway, but the droplets continued to flow sideways.

Hiss was already out of his seat, even though OWG mandates stated everyone should stay seated until the SST came to a complete stop. But there he stood, checking his luggage, making sure nothing broke during the flight.

From their seats, the flight attendants watched Hiss, but they knew better than to say anything. Govicide Agents did what they wanted. Even in the air, flight attendants had no power over them. The attendants were there to serve, even if the Agents acted against flying mandates.

Locke thought it would be funny if the SST came to a sudden stop. Hiss would go flying. He grinned at the thought.

But as bad as pilot's landing had been, he was pretty smooth getting around the tarmac. The SST stopped at the gate and Hiss exited first. Locke, though twenty-five years younger, had a hard time catching up to him in the airport. They weren't beside each other until they sat in the limousine.

"What's your hurry?" Locke asked, nonchalant on the surface, but interested underneath.

"I was going to wait until after we saw this last place, but you might as well know now. The Director wants a meeting with us when we get back."

Locke's insides imploded.

He grabbed the edge of the seat with both hands to keep from pitching forward. A meeting? With the Director?

Locke remembered the Director's tirade during the Hamilton investigation. The investigation had been at a standstill. Kind of like the same place this one was now. But, there were fifteen Agents with Locke on the case. So, the criticism could be divided into sixteenths. With just two of them, the blame would be divided in halves.

A meeting was bound to happen sooner or later. But so soon?

How would the Director feel about his risky decision to appoint a Homicide Detective to Govicide? Probably not too good. He hadn't been much help to Hiss.

But that wasn't entirely correct.

In actuality, Locke knew more than Hiss. But, he knew more because of an unmandated meeting with Hamilton. He knew more because of all the envelopes and the research behind Hiss' back.

All of this information would please the Director. He'd realize they were getting somewhere. But, it would also be the end of Locke, unless he disguised how he knew what he did.

Plus, Hiss would have to understand what Locke knew. That would be the tough part. Locke would have to lie to him, too. He couldn't come right out and tell the truth about everything.

The two choices were these. Go to the Director with nothing and get criticized and disciplined. Or, go to the Director with ill-gotten information, lie to him, and get praise.

"The Director, huh?" Locke asked, the tapping of his hand on the armrest giving his feelings away.

"Yes."

The limousine pulled out from the curb.

"What are you planning to tell him?" The question didn't come out right, a mental slip.

"What . . . I . . . am planning to tell him? You mean . . . we, right?" Hiss smirked.

"Yes, of course. I mean," Locke's face distorted, "you're the senior Agent so I thought you'd do the talking." A bad lie.

"Well, you are correct. I will tell him the truth. Why would I tell the Director anything else?"

"Of course, you'll tell him the truth. But, we don't have much, do we?" Locke knew a lot of truth. Unspeakable truth. If he could just find a way to . . .

"I think we have quite a bit." Hiss faced Locke straight on. "We have the cash. The labs will determine how it was made. We have those parts that will be processed to see which OWG Plant made them. Our torturers are arriving at the plant in Punjabburg as we speak to extract more information from those workers. I think we have quite a bit of truth. And a lot more on the way. Am I missing something here, Govicide Agent Locke?"

"You think that's enough to please the Director?" They could have so much more truth if Locke found a way to let Hiss in on his secrets.

"The Director will decide. We are always at his mercy. But what I tell him will be the truth. Unless you have more to add?"

Locke opened his mouth then chomped down hard to stop his words. If he continued, there was no going back. Once he told Hiss about the envelopes, the Symbol, the unmandated talk with Hamilton, et cetera, there could be no "half way." It was the whole way or nothing.

Continuing his last-second analysis, Locke's attention drifted from Hiss. Could he tell Hiss everything?

Impossible.

He didn't trust Hiss. Locke knew his partner would undermine him at a moment's notice, if needed. Moreover, Locke believed Hiss would rather fail in stopping Hamilton and his comrades by following OWG mandates than by not following them.

Instead, he replied, "No. Nothing to add. Just seems to me if this was a Homicide investigation, I'd think we have a lot of information, but not many leads."

Hiss laughed, bending over his seat. "Please, please, Govicide Agent Locke, never compare anything you did in Homicide to what we do here. Oh, but that is a good laugh, though." A cough interrupted his guffaws. "Thank you for that one."

The conversation might have continued, with Locke taking the brunt of Hiss' jokes and criticisms, but they were already at the site, an abandoned power plant.

A main building, the size of Locke's entire living quarters complex, at one time contained the office and control facilities. To the south, about one hundred yards away,

stood two cement funnels, each about two hundred feet tall and thirty yards across. Surrounding the area was a chain link fence with barbed wire at the top.

The rain fell harder as the limousine slowed.

Weeds sprouted through the pavement. Bushes and trees on the premises looked like foliage in a jungle, growing out of control in every direction. Most of the windows were broken or cracked.

Someone found the cash on the street beside the abandoned buildings, as if the cash dropped right out of somebody's pocket. Like the Cornville site, the cash resembled garbage from a distance.

OWG Local Authorities had cordoned off the area with economic crime tape, although it wasn't needed. The street running by the facility was in the same condition as the pavement inside. Nobody had used it in a long time.

The Agents got out, the driver providing them with umbrellas. Hiss collected the cash and stuffed it in a plastic bag. Locke watched him from across the street. Locke would've helped but the cash came second now. Finding the Symbol was first.

Strolling the street, Locke checked for what now was an obsession for him: the Symbol. It still frustrated him that he didn't see any outside of Pak City. His eyes and head swept back and forth scoping every sign, wall, and sidewalk.

At the end of the street, he bore left toward a dead end. Standing under his umbrella, he agonized about the meeting with the Director, less than five hours away. His self-control would be tested, sitting there while the Director and Hiss talked about a fraction of what Locke knew.

The rain slowed to a sprinkle. The sky lightened with the sun trying to poke through. In response, Locke folded the umbrella.

And there it was.

Because of the umbrella over his head, he hadn't been able to see into the sky further than a few feet. On the side of the first silo, Hamilton's comrades had painted the Symbol.

But there were two silos. Was there a Symbol on the other?

Without hesitation, Locke tramped into the weeds at the end of the fence line. Since the second silo sat one hundred yards inside the fence, he couldn't get very close. All he needed to do was get a better angle.

He hung onto the fence as he went. A couple of times he slipped on the slick brush, but holding the fence steadied him. All the while, he kept his eyes up.

It took two minutes to get to a point where he could view the back of the silo. And twenty more cautious steps secured his answer.

There was a Symbol on the second one too. Both were black, about fifty feet high and twenty feet wide.

Locke shook the fence and laughed. The chain links rippled one way, then the other.

Seeing these Symbols gave him an idea. Locke wanted to see Hiss' reaction. Hiss wouldn't be able to deny these Symbols existed. Or say they were an optical illusion. Or just a crack in the tundra, like he claimed outside Snow City.

Locke got out his phone and dialed.

"Where are you?" Hiss sounded like he'd been looking for Locke.

"I walked the fence line over here. I want you to see something."

"What did you find?"

“You’ll know when I show it to you.”

“Okay.”

Finally, finally, finally. Here was his chance. His chance to show Hiss that there were even more clues if Hiss would open his eyes.

Hiss stomped through the weeds like Locke, but he wasn’t smart enough to use the fence as a crutch. He fell at least twice. Locke stifled a laugh.

“What is it? What do I need to see?” Hiss asked, sweating, his combover in tatters, suit drenched.

Locke pointed to the silo. “See that?”

“What? What am I looking for?” Hiss’ eyes followed Locke’s fingertips.

“The upside down U on the silo.”

“I see it. What about it?”

“There’s one on the other silo too. They mean something.”

“Did you not try to point out something like this when we were in Red Star City?”

Locke nodded as if his head was out of control. “Yeah, I did. I spotted one on the bow of the ship.”

Hiss stared at the second silo for a few seconds longer. “And this is what you made me mess up my suit over?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You are telling me you brought all the way over here to point out some graffiti?” Hiss’ hands went to his hips.

“Graffiti? That’s not graffiti.” What was wrong with Hiss?

“You better calm down, Govicide Agent Locke. I do not like your tone.”

Locke almost jumped out of his wet shoes. “My tone? What does my tone have to do with this? I’ve seen these Symbols everywhere. Gambling City. Dale City. Cornville. Snow City. And you think it’s graffiti?”

Hiss grabbed Locke by the jacket. “Those things may have been up there for twenty years. Just because the cash is here does not mean they have anything to do with it. I am sure whoever put those there have been caught a long time ago.”

“You’re wrong, Govicide Agent Hiss. Those Symbols connect to the cash. I’m convinced.” No explosions went off inside Locke. No worry. No anxiety. This is how it felt to speak the truth with no mandates in the way.

“You are thinking about telling this to the Director? Is that what this is? Are you going to tell him about a bunch of graffiti? Do you know how stupid we will look?”

Locke tried to get out of Hiss’ grasp. “These Symbols mean something. Don’t you see what’s going on? Free Enterprisers. This is their Symbol. All the cash. All these places all over the world! The way they seem to be everywhere. Can’t you put it together?”

Although Hiss was shorter and older than Locke, he was heavier. He slammed Locke into the chain link fence. Locke felt x-marks forming on his back. He tried to push away but Hiss had him by seventy pounds.

Hiss lowered his voice. “Go ahead. Tell me what these Symbols mean. Go ahead, tell me.” The air seeped out of Locke from Hiss’ weight. “You have no answer for that, do you? Just as I thought. You have nothing. Paintings on a silo? Something you saw on that ship?”

“They’re all over Gambling City!” Locke fought back by pulling himself off the fence. His efforts were useless. Hiss had him.

“I have never seen any. Even so, you and I both know the story of Free Enterprisers. They are just a way to scare subjects into staying loyal to the OWG. Showing what would happen if everything returned to the old way. Before the OWG. Nobody wants that, correct?” Hiss asked.

“What if the Masses don’t want it?” The OWG never un-mandated the thought because the supposition was so outrageous. The Masses wanted everything they received because they needed it.

Hiss bounced Locke off the fence and let him go, putting his finger almost up Locke’s nose. “Nobody is that stupid. We have subjects who play games with the System. Try to get around it. But the Masses want all we provide. We give them what they need. We provide everything for everyone. Without us, they would be nothing. They would die.”

As the fat Agent rattled on, Locke fixated on his single sentence: What if the Masses don’t want it? It meant something. His subconscious added everything he’d seen and heard to this point and this was the conclusion. Not the only conclusion, but one major conclusion of many.

What if? What if there were subjects who didn’t like what the OWG provided, even if the OWG wanted to provide it?

What would it mean?

Could it be so simple? Maybe Hamilton and his comrades simply didn’t want what the OWG provided? Nothing more, nothing less.

That sounded insane. Who didn’t want everything provided to them? The Masses would have to get everything themselves. And Hiss was right: The Masses could never do it.

But how did killing a bunch of Agents further this idea?

Hiss would never join him in his search for what the Symbol meant. If Hiss couldn’t imagine anyone going to these lengths was more than a casual Offender, he was beyond persuasion.

The other Symbols could be painted, drawn, etched, et cetera in no time. These pieces of work took hours, maybe amounting to days. That was serious work, taking dedication, done by subjects who believed in their actions. These weren’t subjects who tried to get around the OWG and the System for the fun of it.

But, despite everything, it wasn’t his concern to bring Hiss to the truth. Hiss and he were supposed to find the truth together. Yet, one of them wasn’t open to it. One of them was comfortable searching for the truth, period. The other felt comfortable looking for the truth, but only if he could ignore other truths along the way.

Locke studied Hiss, still on a diatribe about the Masses. He was no longer somebody from whom Locke hid information.

Hiss was the enemy. Not an enemy of OWG, of course. Nor the System. He wasn’t even an enemy of Locke’s.

Hiss was an enemy of the truth. Something Locke could never be.

But, Locke felt like he needed to say something, anything to shut Hiss up on that street.

“You’re right, Govicide Agent Hiss. It would be insane for anyone to refuse what the OWG wants to give them.” Locke took a long pause because the next statement would be his biggest lie yet. “And you’re right about those upside down U’s. Just graffiti. And it’s not our work to catch those kinds of criminals.”

Hiss’ quick response told Locke all he needed to know. “See how easy that was, Govicide Agent Locke? But do not make me come all this way for nothing again.” He spun around, picking his way toward the street.

Trudging behind, Locke pondered the issue of the Director’s meeting. What if the Director was as defiant to the truth as Hiss?

But he was getting ahead of himself. He didn’t know what the Director knew. He wouldn’t know until the meeting. And the only way to find out was for Locke to keep his mouth shut.

Maybe the Director knew about the Symbol already. Maybe he already had information on Hamilton’s accomplices. Maybe he wasn’t as willing to ignore the truth as Hiss was. Maybe other Agents collected evidence showing Locke was right.

But, once again, the only way to find out was to keep his mouth shut, at least at the beginning of the meeting.

In another hour, they were back on the SST. Hiss took his usual spot in the front. Locke went to the rear. After the SST reached cruising altitude, Hiss moved to a seat near Locke to go over the meeting agenda.

It wasn’t so much “their” agenda, as “Hiss” agenda. Locke listened, already having his own plan. If the Director knew anything more than Hiss, Locke planned to side with the Director. Easy. Whatever Hiss said in his fifteen-minute speech on the SST was irrelevant.

With a few nods and a few more “uh-huh’s,” and “absolutely’s,” Locke endured Hiss’ run-down. Locke gave Hiss enough attention to fool his partner, but tuned out enough to keep his disgust and boredom from showing. Hiss, seemingly satisfied, finished and returned to his seat.

As Locke thought of plans, he remembered his original one. Locke had anticipated solving the case before Jade’s pregnancy started to show.

The plan was impossible to execute now. If Hiss ignored facts right in front of him, the case might not get solved at all. Worse yet, Hamilton’s comrades could attack the OWG, if that was their plan, before they were stopped and Locke would feel responsible.

And, in the end, Jade would be the collateral casualty of not closing the case. Locke could accept his own demise. But Jade was detached from what was going on. She wasn’t responsible for protecting the Masses from Hamilton and others. She wasn’t responsible for making sure the OWG was able to provide Goods and Services for everyone.

But she’d pay the consequences anyway.

He could get through this meeting. But waiting for everyone to find out that Jade was pregnant would tear both of them apart.

CHAPTER 34

From the limousine, Hiss pointed at The District's monuments, reciting their history as if Locke didn't know. He acted as if their argument hours ago never happened.

These great males who started the OWG and brought the World out of anarchy, glorified by these monuments, wouldn't have ignored all the warning signs Locke saw. They wouldn't have stood idly by while others tried to wreck the OWG's plans. They wouldn't have been willing to put aside their desire for the collective good because they were afraid of the truth.

As Locke exited the ride in front of the Govicide Building, his hands didn't tremble. No feelings of trouble shook him. He'd resolved to keep his mouth shut long enough for Hiss to make an idiot of himself. Keeping his mouth shut would keep him out of trouble. Hiss liked to talk. Locke was happy to let him.

Then, Locke would jump to the Director's side.

One final point pinched him right behind his ears when the driver opened the front door to Govicide Headquarters. What if the Director agreed with Hiss? What if Stallings was pleased with their progress? What if he, like Hiss, didn't understand something bigger was going on here?

No, the Director was smarter than that. He'd expect more than what Hiss gave him. He wouldn't be pleased with the progress so far. He expected more out of his Agents than this.

Zell waited for them by the elevator. She seemed to remember Hiss, smiling and hugging him. She briefly acknowledged Locke. Seeing the two of them together--Zell tall, skinny, and pale, Hiss short, chubby, and red-faced--was quite a sight.

They stepped out of the elevator onto the Director's floor. All the young Govicide workers hustled here and there like the first time. Upon seeing the Agents, they bowed and clapped, then returned to their duties.

Zell opened the door to the first fancy room. There were the paintings Locke saw before. Seeing them made him realize how far he'd come in just ten days. Before, pride filled him.

Now, belief emptied from him.

The OWG wasn't at all like the paintings showed. And the Free Enterprisers weren't as ruthless as described . . . at least not yet.

Zell closed the door behind them. At the far end, just like before, sat the Director.

"My Govicide Agents, please take your seats," the Director shouted down the table.

Hearing the Director's voice initiated a tick of doubt inside Locke. He shook it off.

Hiss pulled out a chair and sat. "Director Stallings, thank you so much for wanting to meet with us. It is good to be back in the District."

Locke sat beside Hiss, but then moved his chair further away.

Stallings folded his arms. "How long has it been, Govicide Agent Hiss? A couple of months, correct?"

"Yes, Director." Hiss shifted in his seat.

“And you, Govicide Agent Locke. You, of course, were here recently. How have you liked traveling around the World?”

“It was . . .” Locke, realizing his voice was too low, repeated himself speaking louder. “It was fantastic, Director.”

“Of course,” he answered seeming distracted with something else on his mind. “So, my Agents. I brought you here so you could give me your latest update face to face.”

Latest update, Locke thought. What did “latest” mean? They had given him no updates.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, you have been diligent in keeping me apprised of your progress.”

Locke’s jaw clenched, and his eyes cut across towards Hiss. His partner sent reports to HQ the whole time? Hiss made the occasional call but Hiss had been talking to the Director this whole time?

“Thank you, Director. I do what I can for the One World Government and for the Honor of Govicide. I am sorry we could not find more.” Hiss beamed, but didn’t bother to meet Locke’s eyes.

“I am sure more leads will turn up in the near future. But this case is a tough one. Especially Hamilton.” Stallings sneezed and cracked his knuckles. “Can you believe he still has not broken?” The Director shook his head and gazed out the window for a moment.

Locke tried to read the Director’s expression, but couldn’t help himself. “Break? From what, Director?”

“I guess Govicide Agent Hiss did not tell you. We have been using the information collected by you two to torture Hamilton.”

Locke hoped the Director didn’t notice him flinch. He chased the expression away. “I thought Hamilton was off-limits to all Govicide workers.” Locke tried to not sound like a Hamilton sympathizer. “You said you couldn’t allow your--”

The Director interrupted. “Govicide Agent Locke, that was over a week ago. Since then, with the information you have collected, we have data to use against him. The sites, the cash, the thing on the tundra, combined with a few lies, seems to be working. Before, when you interrogated him, we just had a bunch of useless dead bodies. Now we have economic information. And that is much more powerful.”

“Yes, Director, how is the torture proceeding?” Hiss piped up, knocking on the table.

“We think he could break at anytime. With the pills, the physical and mental torture, sleep deprivation. It is only a matter of time.”

Slumping in his chair, Locke didn’t care if the Director noticed. This was a set-up the entire time. And Locke had been an unknowing partner.

His own work led to Hamilton being tortured. He imagined Hamilton in Homicide’s torture room, screaming as the Govicide interrogators probed him for information. Locke knew the methods, having taught them to several Agents over the last two years.

Hiss and the Director continued to talk, ignoring Locke. Their conversation strayed from Hamilton. Locke’s fingernails tore at his suit fabric, his anger causing small frays to appear.

His attention stayed on Hamilton. If Hamilton suspected Locke and Hiss gave the torturers all their information, then Locke had no hope of getting more out of him. Locke

could easily postulate whom Hamilton wanted to make his fifteenth and sixteenth victims.

And even if Hamilton didn't know where the torturers got their information, Locke couldn't see himself looking Hamilton in the eye and not telling him so the next time they met. The guilt would bubble to the surface and drown them both.

A horrific thought brushed aside everything in his mind. What if Hamilton told them Locke came to see him? What if Hamilton told them about Jade's pregnancy? What if Hamilton told the torturers he told Locke about the Symbol?

Each agonizing question curled the anger inside of him like a spring. Locke wrapped his feet around the legs of the chair. He felt he could snap them in two.

"Govicide Agent Locke, do you have anything to add?" The Director's question pulled Locke back to the present.

"Excuse me, sir?" Locke sat up.

"Do you have anything to add to Govicide Agent Hiss' report about Snow City?"

"Uh, no, Director."

Hiss and the Director resumed their conversation.

Locke considered he wouldn't still be sitting in his chair if Hamilton mentioned him. If he'd said the Agent came to visit him, Locke would've been thrown in the Govicide Prison already. Especially if the killer told them about the pregnancy.

Hamilton could've used his knowledge to gain favor with his torturers, telling them he had information on one of their Govicide Agents breaking a mandate if they would go easier on him.

But, Locke wasn't in prison. Hamilton had kept Locke's secrets to himself?

Why would Hamilton protect him? The killer had every reason in the World to divulge the information. He could've stopped his torture sessions in an instant by mentioning Locke's name. But he didn't. He might have even been excused from some of his murders if he exposed a corrupt Agent. But he kept his mouth shut.

A lump lodged in Locke's throat. His work had caused Hamilton's torture. And in turn, Hamilton kept his mouth shut about Locke, about Jade's pregnancy, about everything they talked about.

Locke had been weak with the Govicide luxury around him, while Hamilton showed strength in the face of imminent death.

Hiss' and the Director's conversation registered as background noise. But obviously the Director wasn't displeased with their progress at all.

The meeting dragged on. The more Locke heard, the less he liked. Hiss assured the Director they were on the verge of something big. That all of the cash would be tracked down. That Hamilton would talk eventually. That very soon the OWG would be providing even more Goods and Services to the Masses.

Locke's stomach rolled over. He didn't believe a word of it.

He wanted to tell the Director and Hiss that if Hamilton hadn't mentioned Locke talking to him in his cell last week, then Hamilton would never say anything of any value. He wanted to say they were no closer to catching anyone than they were a week ago. He wanted to say . . .

"Director, have you ever seen an upside down U around the District?" Locke's slouch transformed into a salute. Out of the corner of his eye, Hiss shook his head.

“What, Govicide Agent Locke? An upside down U?” The Director sounded confused.

“Yes. It’s been in every city. There are many around Gambling City. But I also saw one on a lock in Cornville. On a pole in Snow City. And on the tundra. And the most recent ones were on two silos in Francoville. They’re everywhere. Do you know what they are?”

“I am guessing graffiti. I do not get out much, Govicide Agent Locke. I think I told you that before.”

Hiss interjected. “Uh, Director, Govicide Agent Locke brought this up to me before and we already discussed it.” He gave Locke a meaningful glance, full of unnamed threats.

Locke lowered his voice so only Hiss could hear. “I have something to say and I’m going to say it.”

“Hey,” Hiss whispered, grabbing Locke by the arm, “we are minutes away from getting out of here. Do not ruin it.”

“Is there a problem, Agents?”

Hiss beamed up at the Director. “No, Director. None at all.”

“Then please, Govicide Agent Locke, continue.”

Grabbing Hiss’ arm in return, muttering, “He wants to hear what I have to say. Are you going to get in the way of the Director?” Locke retorted.

Hiss released Locke’s arm at the question.

“What I said, Director, is I’ve noticed these upside down U’s all over. And I don’t know what they are.”

“Like I said, Govicide Agent Locke, I have not seen them.”

“Well, Director. They’re present in all the areas where this cash has disappeared. Some are big. Some are small. But I think they mean something.”

The Director shifted in his seat, crossing his legs. “What do you think they mean?”

“I think they are the sign of Free Enterprisers.”

Locke felt Hiss roll his eyes.

“Free Enterprisers? Did I hear correctly?” Stallings craned his ear forward.

“Yes, Director.” Locke swallowed the lump in his throat. Hamilton had been strong. Now was his chance show strength as well.

Stallings laughed. Hiss added to the chorus by directing a chuckle at Locke.

“Govicide Agent Locke, we are going to have a problem with you if each time you see something unusual, you think it is Free Enterprisers,” the Director answered, regaining his composure.

“But Director. They’re everywhere. They were put there on purpose.” Locke reminded himself to watch his tone.

“That may very well be the case. But Free Enterprisers? Come now. Govicide Agent Hiss, have we not found Offenders who used signs before?”

“Yes, Director. We have,” Hiss answered.

“And Govicide Agent Hiss, what do you make of these U’s?”

“For the record, Director. I only noticed the ones on the silos in Francoville. These others he is mentioning, I did not see. But the ones on the silos were graffiti. They could have been painted two days ago or twenty years ago.”

“Upside down you say?”

“Yes, Director,” Hiss replied.

Locke wanted to scream. He wished they were in Gambling City instead of the District. He’d march them right out to the street and show them all the Symbols. “But, Director. I think something is going on here.”

“Free Enterprisers?” the Director asked, lowering his head a degree. He took a long deep breath then rose, striding to the bay window. “Govicide Agent Locke. You know Free Enterprisers are not real. You know they were created at the beginning of the OWG to make sure everyone understood there was only one way for everyone to have everything. And that is through the OWG. The Masses doing their own thing causes everyone to suffer. The Free Enterprisers were created as a reminder to everyone. Sure, we have Offenders who try to get around the System. They try to outrun us here at Govicide. Try to evade the OWG. But none of them stop using the OWG. They still get their OWG Healthcare. They still get their OWG Food. They still get their OWG Entertainment. They still ride the buses. They do not truly want the OWG out of their lives. Not that it matters. We still catch them and put them away. Some we execute. Others we allow to live. But what you are talking about, if I read you correctly, is that you think there is a group out there who wants the OWG to disappear. They want to take over. Because that is what a true Free Enterpriser is. Am I right?” The Director paced, getting closer to Locke than he had ever been. He stopped, straightening a chair against the table.

Locke added up what he knew. Everything about Hamilton. About the messages. About the Symbol. About the different sites. About the cash.

What would it take to overrun the OWG? A large group of subjects. Guns. But they were un-mandated and not manufactured anymore. Tactics to organize everyone so they knew the plan. An understanding of the inner workings of the System, and being able to show subjects how to get around it. There were Hamilton and Messenger. But how many more? Thousands? Tens of thousands?

“Director, before I answer that, we know Hamilton murdered those Agents in the same cities where the cash warehouses were. Most of this trip consisted of going back to the locations of the murders. Upside down U’s were at all his murders. I think he drew them himself.” A kernel of a thought came to him. But it came and went so fast he couldn’t understand it. “The cash is one of the Free Enterprisers’ main weapons to undermine the OWG. That is, according to the Manual. We also know these Free Enterprisers--let’s just call them that for now--tried to mislead us with our own WPS devices. So, we have murder. Cash. A plan that involved fooling us. And we still don’t know how Hamilton got around the World. Or how they moved the cash in the first place. And how could Hamilton be in such good condition without the OWG?”

The Director paced again. “Yes, Govicide Agent Locke. But, everything in the World is working properly, right? There have been no problems with any distributions of Goods and Services. Has there?”

“No,” Locke answered.

“And the vehicle outside Snow City. Govicide Agent Hiss believed it was a setup to get you two out of the way, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So, we cannot count that. And you still do not know how the rest of the sites relate to each other, do you?”

“No.”

“And there has been no revenge for that little mess up in Cornville?”

Locke forgot all about Ames’ death already. He hated himself for it. “No.”

“And one more thing, Govicide Agent Locke. If these subjects are truly Free Enterprisers, in the strictest sense of the word since you brought it up, have there been any attempts at someone murdering you?” The Director stopped, spinning on his heel to face Locke.

Locke thought to the night when the Messenger left the note on his bed. “Me? No. Why me?”

“Well, you did have something to do with one of their comrades getting caught. You are one of the reasons he is in prison. Who knows how long he would have gone on? But you, along with Govicide, stopped him. So, I ask you again. Has anyone attempted to harm you since you caught Hamilton?”

The Director had put Locke at the center of a puzzle. Of course, the answer was “no.” There had been no attempts to kill Locke. But answering the truth, it took some punch away from Locke’s argument. Fortunately, he didn’t tell the Director the complete truth. He could imagine what he’d say. *No, Director. I have talked to Hamilton. We had a half hour conversation. And one of his Messengers has been leaving me notes on this trip. And when the Messenger had a chance to attack me in my room, he didn’t.*

“No, Director. No one has tried to harm me.”

“And there we have it. No violence except for the killing of the Agents, but the subject has been caught. No stoppage of Goods and Services. No large group of subjects that anyone has seen or heard. No threats made against the OWG or the System. But, you insist there are Free Enterprisers just because of some graffiti?”

When the Director put it like that, Locke’s idea sounded preposterous.

Why should he change his mind? The Director was the expert, not Locke.

“I think I see your point, Director.” Locke slumped.

“I told you,” Hiss chided to the side.

“Govicide Agent Locke, I admire your aggression and worry for the OWG.”

Stallings stepped to his favorite window again. “But your imagination is getting the best of you. All you and Govicide Agent Hiss are doing is tracking a bunch of Offenders. These Offenders happened to kill a few more Agents than we would like. They are no different than all the Offenders before them. They think they can outwit the System. They cannot. They think they can outwit Govicide. They cannot. Remember: Two billion subjects on this World need what we provide. There is no reason to overthrow it. They would only be destroying their great standard of living. Let me say there is a group of, say, fifty thousand subjects who get together and try to overthrow the OWG. Come in here. Destroy the System. Trying to send us all back to pre-OWG. Do you think the rest of the two billion subjects would stand for that? Will these two billion subjects really just let their OWG Healthcare, their OWG Food, their electricity, their entertainment, their sex credits, their heat, their air conditioning, their education, would they really allow a measly fifty thousand subjects take it away from them? Of course not. See, Govicide Agent Locke, it is impossible for any group to overthrow the OWG. Because everyone needs us. And the Masses will defend the OWG against anyone who tries to take their Goods and Services away. So, you see, there is no real way Free Enterprisers, even if they existed, could win. The Masses would never stand for it.”

The Director had a way of making a point. He had years of practice.

Doubt crawled into Locke through his ears, on the back of Stallings' words. For over a week, he'd convinced himself a wave was rising against the OWG; a looming wave about crash down and wash away the OWG. He was sure of it.

However, in a matter of a minute, the Director managed to make Locke question it all. The Director said the attempt would be futile, so why would anyone try?

"Director Stallings, I think I see what you're saying."

"There have been similar young Agents. They come in here and see a Free Enterpriser on every street corner. They eventually fall into line and figure out how we work, and why Free Enterprisers do not exist. You will do the same."

But he didn't want to be like every other Agent. He wanted to be . . . unique. Another word un-mandated in the OWG.

"So, anything else to cover?" The Director walked to the head of the table.

Hiss stood. "No, Director."

"No, Director." Locke rose more slowly than Hiss. "You have made me realize the error in my thinking. Thank you."

"Okay. Well, then--"

"Excuse me, sir," Locke interrupted. The thought kernel from earlier in the conversation popped in his mind again. "Now that I think about it. I'm obviously new and have made some bad assumptions. If I may, would you allow me to interview Hamilton again?"

With no ban on Govicide Agents any more, the Director had cleared an obstacle. No more sneaking around.

He continued, warming to his sudden idea. "It might help me see, even more so, that you're right. That Hamilton is just a murdering Offender. That he's not a Free Enterpriser . . ." His lips stumbled, not quite believing his good fortune. ". . . I mean, if he's in Gambling City anyway. I could talk to him. See what makes him tick. Especially since you already let me interrogate him before even though I wasn't an Agent yet."

He shifted his feet, hoping the Director wouldn't see through his underlying motivations. The Director made him doubt the Free Enterpriser idea but that didn't stop him from wanting to glean more information from Hamilton.

Stallings gazed out his window again. "You know, Govicide Agent Locke, Govicide Agent Hiss told me about how he caught you outside of Hamilton's cell when he first met you."

Not an ounce of anger dropped onto Locke with that statement. Subconsciously, he'd suspected it all along. "It's true. I was there."

"Just doing his work I assigned him. You are a new Agent. We must keep an eye on you. Especially since I appointed you and you did not pass the Govicide test. The first subject of the Masses to be a Govicide Agent picked by me cannot fail. You understand? It just would not be very Director-like if I appointed you and then you failed. Hiss is only making sure I made a good decision."

"Sure," Locke answered.

"Regarding talking to Hamilton . . ." he coughed, ". . . the experience might be good for you. But I am worried about what Hiss said about you observing Hamilton when you knew it went against my mandates."

“Director, I knew what your mandates were, and if I planned to break them wouldn’t I have been talking to Hamilton when Hiss found me? I mean, I didn’t know Hiss would show up early. I was curious. I spent two years chasing him. I couldn’t help but be a bit sentimental. And since he sat only a few hundred yards away . . . well . . .”

“I see.” Those cracked knuckles rapped the desk. “Never disobey me again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Director. I do.”

“But . . . maybe talking to Hamilton will be good for you. You got to talk to him as a Homicide Detective. This time around I am sure you will see he is nothing but an Offender. Because we cannot have new Agents running around seeing Free Enterprisers everywhere.” The Director returned to his chair.

This was just the bit of luck Locke hoped for. His bold question proved worth it. He wouldn’t have to sneak around. He wouldn’t have to lie to Hiss. He wouldn’t have to come up with excuses. This time, his meeting would be official, but yet off the record.

“Thank you, Director. I will not let the OWG down.” He saved the fist pump for later.

“Govicide Agent Hiss, could you accompany Locke when he goes to see Hamilton?”

As fast as Locke’s prospects grew, they died. It took all his energy to keep his head high. With Hiss there, nothing would get done. He’d have to avoid more topics than he talked about. In fact, Locke wouldn’t even waste his time if Hiss accompanied him.

Hiss shook his head. “Director Stallings, with all due respect, this heathen murdered my partner. And it upsets me . . .” Hiss threw a glance at Locke. “. . . that my current partner wants to talk to that Agent-murdering Offender. If you order me to, I will, of course. But, I would rather not. If Hamilton murdered my mother I would feel different. I got over her death pretty quickly. But a former partner--a Govicide Agent who was serving the OWG, that still hits me pretty hard.”

“I understand. Then we will allow Govicide Agent Locke to talk to Hamilton on his own.”

Once again, a burst of relief surged through Locke. Hiss’ hatred of Hamilton would, for once, work in Locke’s favor.

The Director continued. “But Govicide Agent Locke, I expect a full report documenting the interview second-by-second. You might miss something that our analysts will not.”

Locke had no problem faking a report. “Yes, Director. Of course, I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. If that is all, you two are dismissed.”

“Thank you, Director Stallings,” they replied.

Assistant Zell waited for them on the other side of the door, as if she’d been there the whole time. They followed her the way they came, the two Agents saying nothing to each other. Under normal circumstances, by this time Locke would’ve allowed his anger to attack Hiss in response to him holding out about Hamilton and all the updates. But, getting to talk to Hamilton without sneaking around doused the irritation.

The murderer wouldn’t be happy to see Locke, given his torture. Locke would just have to figure out how to extract the information once he got there.

Zell left them at the top of the steps in front of the building. “Good-bye Govicide Agent Hiss. Good to see you again. And Govicide Agent Locke, we’re counting on you.”

The limousine pulled away.

“Our meeting was going pretty well until you opened your mouth.” Hiss bent over and poured himself a drink. It was not Scotch this time. The label said OWG Non-Alcohol Bourbon.

“It didn’t exactly go the way I thought it would. You sure held out on me.” Locke stared out his window.

“Govicide Agent Locke, there is no easy way to tell my partner that the Director has asked me to keep an eye on you.”

“I didn’t mean that. I’m a new Agent. I guess it’s to be expected. I just wish you had told me about filing reports directly with the Director. I might have wanted to add something.”

“Such as?” Hiss laughed. “Like the whole thing about Free Enterprisers? Yes, that would have gone well. You see how he reacted back there. He would have pulled us back to the District in no time.”

Hiss was correct about that, Locke agreed now that he got to see the Director’s reaction.

“You knew about them torturing Hamilton?”

Hiss took a sip. “Oh yeah. I took great pleasure in it while we were away. Wish I could have been there myself. But that would have meant being in the same room as him so--”

“You should have told me. I did catch him after all.”

“Uh-huh.”

Locke could feel the blow-off.

They traveled the rest of the way to the airport in silence. Locke tried to be angrier with his partner, but the prospect of a meeting with Hamilton quelled it. One less topic to worry about.

But, Locke couldn’t see how he’d continue his partnership with Hiss. Hiss was unpredictable. A liar. Shady. Locke couldn’t trust anything emanating from his mouth. Every moment was just one mental test after another.

He’d have to overcome it. And preparing to question Hamilton was a good start. He’d get right to it as soon as they landed in Gambling City. He’d write down what he saw, what he thought he saw, what the secret messages said-- he thought it too risky to take them with him.

Hamilton had answers, Free Enterpriser or not. Hamilton knew something, even if he wasn’t the OWG destroyer Locke once believed he was. He knew answers Locke didn’t. Yet, Locke couldn’t understand how.

How did he know?

CHAPTER 35

Locke fixed his thoughts on Jade. He wanted to hear what he missed. Maybe she had more insight into her graph idea than what she could mention on the phone, even though he doubted her opinion. How much had she missed him? He'd tell her how much he missed her.

The limousine pulled up in front of the living quarters. The driver hustled to get the bags, but Locke grabbed them himself. He had dragged them around the World. Lugging them thirty more feet was inconsequential.

As he approached the front door, he expected Jade to peek out one of the windows. He wanted to surprise her, but she had to have heard the automobile outside.

Yet, she didn't appear.

The front door was unlocked. Odd. She never left it unlocked when she came home. It was automatic. Come in, lock the door.

He set down his luggage, having the urge to call out to her, until he heard the water running. She was in the bathtub. No wonder she hadn't heard him. He'd surprise her after all.

Tiptoeing into the bedroom, he approached the bathroom door, cracked open three inches. He began to take off his jacket and tie when the steam rolling out of the bathroom caught his attention.

Locke threw his tie on the bed. His concentration diverted from seeing the steam to the slightest sound of crying. It wasn't outright crying--more like sniffing.

"Jade?" he nudged the door open.

"Michael? Michael?" A hesitation. "You're home?" She sounded more bothered than surprised by his unexpected voice. "Uh . . . don't come in here . . . I'm almost done."

As he pushed the door open a little further, pangs of confusion flowed through his mind, wrinkling his forehead. Jade should have been more excited to hear he was home. He heard water splashing. Jade seemed to scramble around in the water.

Snaking his neck around the door, he glimpsed the bathtub where the curtain was pulled closed. Locke found this strange. If she were taking a bath, why would she pull the curtain?

"Jade? What are you doing in here?" he asked, seeing Jade's blurred silhouette behind the translucent curtain.

He took another step and felt warm water seep into his shoe. An inch-deep layer of water covered the tiled floor. His detective senses detonated. He knew this scene. He'd seen it before, but usually the subject was already dead.

"Jade!" Locke ripped open the curtain.

She stood there. Though hot water poured from the shower faucet, she shivered. Her arms wrapped around her mid-section, head bowed, knees knocking in the tub full of water.

"Jade! What are you doing?" His eyes raced over her, searching for the object he dreaded. "Where is it?" Locke yelled.

"What?" She buried her head in the far corner.

“You know what!” Locke searched around the edge of the bathtub. Nothing. He checked the sink. Nothing there. Then he noticed that while Jade’s left hand covered her face, her right hand was still clenched and remained tight against her body.

He grabbed her arm and pulled it away from her body. She let out a stifled yelp. She tried to pull her arm away but he was too strong. She fought him, but Locke pried open her fist revealing a razor blade. He swiped it out of her palm and threw it into the toilet, flushing it away.

Her right wrist had no cuts. He let her right arm go and yanked her left arm away from her face, examining the other wrist. No cuts there either. And no blood in the water. Saved her.

In the nick of time.

“Aw Jade . . .” Picking her up out of the shower, the water from her body drenched his suit. Jade sobbed with the power of a caught Offender. She tried to start sentence after sentence. But it was no use.

He laid her on the bed and she curled into a ball. He rushed into the bathroom and retrieved a towel. “Jade, why were you doing that!”

She continued to wail.

“Honey, it’s okay. You’re okay. Why were you doing that?”

All thoughts of Symbols, Hiss, Hamilton, messages, and Govicide fled. His only concern was the female he loved.

He moved her to a dry spot on the bed then wrapped her in her robe. “Did you swallow anything?”

She cried and shook her head, keeping her eyes closed. Pulling up the covers, he lay beside her, arms wrapping her in a cocoon of protection.

For a few a minutes, they said nothing. All his thoughts centered on her. She seemed fine when he left over a week ago. She called him in an attempt to figure out what the Symbol meant. Everything was fine with her work. She still didn’t look pregnant.

What happened to make her try to kill herself?

As a Homicide Detective, though, he saw this often. When a subject was found dead, even if the subject was alone, Locke got the call in case it was a homicide. In ninety-nine percent of the cases, it was easy to tell.

Sometimes the family didn’t want to believe it, but the cause of death was evident in all cases. Pills, razors, an occasional un-mandated gun, et cetera. A subject didn’t need to be a detective to know the cause of death.

And in his twelve years, suicides had become more frequent. Granted, suicides made more Goods and Services available. So, in a way, these subjects killing themselves were doing the OWG and the Masses a favor.

But, why would subjects want to leave the perfect OWG? Why were suicides increasing? And how had this epidemic found its way to Jade?

“Jade . . . Jade . . . please . . . are you okay?” he whispered into her ear.

Her cries quieted into softer snuffles. She seemed to have more control of her emotions, although her legs still shook.

“Jade, why did you try to hurt yourself? Please tell me.”

“Some . . . body . . . knows,” Jade whispered.

He needed no more description. He knew what she meant. His hug slacked off.

“Don’t be mad.” She opened her eyes and locked with his. They started to tear up again. “I did everything I could.”

“Who knows?” In those two syllables he heard his voice crack. He had to find a damper between his tension and his voice, or Jade might feel his confidence breaking down. That would only make her condition worse.

“A female I work with.”

“How does she know?”

“I’ve been . . . throwing up . . . every day since you’ve been gone. And she’s been pregnant before, so she knows what it’s like. And . . . she was in the bathroom with me. She said she knew I was pregnant. I tried to deny it, but the more I did, the more she said she knew the truth.”

Locke shook his head. His immediate thought was to use his Govicide position to influence the worker not to talk. But, that would only make them look more suspicious.

“So, just one female. That’s it?”

“But, she’s the assistant to the OWG Transportation Czar so it’s gonna get spread around real quick.”

Locke stared at the ceiling. He breathed in and exhaled. He started to shake, matching her vibrations.

“Does she know that I’m a Govicide Agent?”

Her chin moved slightly.

Locke closed his eyes shut so hard his cheeks hurt. Granted, the female couldn’t know the fetus was conceived with non-sex credit sex, but that didn’t matter. If she mentioned her suspicions to the OWG Transportation Czar, it would generate news since it was a Govicide Agent’s girlcomrade having children. It was always news. Big news. Word would make its way over to Govicide and go up on the System. The Director would find out, and the call would be made, and Locke would have to answer.

He’d been in a race against time for over a week, but now the finish line had been moved up. The race wasn’t months long anymore. It was hours.

“And . . . I . . . just thought if I . . . you know . . . wasn’t here . . . it would all go away. You’d keep . . . your dream . . . of being a Govicide Agent . . . and you wouldn’t have this on your mind anymore.”

“But Jade, I can’t go on without you.” He hugged her tight.

He should’ve told the Director the truth during his initial interview. But, the opportunity to serve the OWG at its highest level overwhelmed him. He’d been thinking more about serving the OWG than about the love of his life who had the actual problem. His focus should have been on her. He should’ve turned down the interview, period. But an outright rejection would’ve had equally bad repercussions. Nobody said no to the Director.

But, had Locke possessed the courage to decline it then, she wouldn’t have tried to kill herself now.

His life had gone out of control like being dragged behind an OWG bus, being pulled ahead in his life through no action of his own.

He retraced how this happened. How had they gone from being so content to Jade trying to commit suicide?

There was one answer: Hamilton.

If Hamilton had committed his first murder in any other city on the World, Locke would've never been on his case. And if Locke were never on the case, the Director wouldn't have promoted him. In fact, the Director would never have even known Locke. Someone else would've caught Hamilton, and the Director would've promoted another Homicide Detective.

Yes, the only way he could have avoided this problem was if Hamilton didn't commit the first murder in Gambling City. That, however, was uncontrollable. Locke didn't even know Hamilton before the first murder. In fact, according to the System, nobody knew Hamilton before then.

Yet, there he was. In the Homicide Prison.

And here they were. In a prison as well.

But the same male who started this could end it.

Hamilton.

Hamilton had access to medical facilities. He managed to live at least thirty years with some kind of healthcare outside the OWG and the System. They must do abortions. If they fixed teeth, anything was possible.

She'd go back to work and say she was never pregnant. She'd just been sick.

But Hamilton would want something in return.

Something big.

Locke bit his tongue when he followed this thought to its logical conclusion.

What did every prisoner want?

Out.

He'd have to make it appear as some type of breakout. Letting him walk out the front door wouldn't solve anything. Somebody would have to die. Nobody would believe a murderer broke out of prison without killing someone.

If Hamilton wanted out as payment for getting Jade's abortion, Locke needed a plan. He pictured the scenario. He'd make it look like Hamilton somehow picked the lock of his cell door. When Locke showed up to talk to him, the murderer overpowered him. He took the prison keys Locke received on the way in then murdered the Guard and escaped using Locke's automobile. It would be tracked but Hamilton obviously knew how to get around such obstacles.

The problem was trust. Could he trust Hamilton to tell him where to take Jade? Or, would Hamilton want different arrangements? What if Hamilton wanted to take Jade by himself? Would Locke allow that? Hamilton wouldn't show a Govicide Agent the inner workings of how a subject stayed outside the System.

Allowing Jade to go off by herself with a murderer was a stretch. To allow Jade to leave with Hamilton could make her a hostage. Or worse, a victim. Locke would rather be kicked out of Govicide and be dead than put his precious Jade in danger.

The only choice would be for Hamilton to give Locke an address so he could take Jade himself. Or, Locke and Jade might follow Hamilton to wherever his group performed abortions for their females.

"There's something I have to do."

Jade opened her eyes. "What?"

"I think there's someone who can get us out of this jam."

Jade rose on one elbow. "Someone in Govicide? Someone who works for the Healthcare Czar?"

“Uh, no. No one so official.” He might as well just tell her. “Hamilton.”

“The murderer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t think this is a good time for a joke.” She was starting to sound like her old self.

“No joke.” Locke took a long breath, feeling like he sucked in all the room’s air then blew it back out. “Jade, I’ve seen things across this World over the last week I cannot explain. Clues that add up to my belief that we’ve been lied to. Facts that just don’t make sense. Observations that are connected somehow. Hamilton has the answers. And I believe he’s got a solution to our problem as well.”

Jade curled up close to him. Her eyes were still red from crying. “You can’t trust him. He’s a murderer. Not just any killer out there. He murdered Govicide Agents like you. Agents going out there to make sure everyone gets everything from the OWG.”

“But . . . what if there are subjects out there who don’t want what the OWG offers? What about them?”

“Who would be like that?” Jade, for a second, almost sounded like Hiss.

“Hamilton. And he has comrades. Maybe a lot of comrades.”

“How do you know?”

Locke shook his head. “I don’t have time to tell you. But Hamilton can help us. He can get around the System.”

“He’s not gonna do this without wanting something in return, Michael. He is in jail, after all.”

Locke didn’t answer.

Jade dropped her head. “I don’t want to know, do I?”

“Jade, I need to be sure you aren’t going to hurt yourself if I leave. You have to promise me you’ll stick this out, because I can’t go on without you.” His body struck a chord, making him feel like he might throw up. The rest of his body was finally discovering how serious he was about this.

“Michael, I promise you I’ll be fine because I trust you. Releasing him sounds risky, but if it gets us out of our problem then I support you. But to me, it sounds impossible.” She hugged him.

He took a few minutes to change out of his wet clothes. He chose attire a bit more casual and non-black. Better to not dress like a Govicide Agent and not draw attention to himself if something went wrong.

“Be careful,” she reminded him, her tearing eyes betraying her relaxed posture.

He left their living quarters with worry for his girlcomrade and fear for the upcoming hour. So much was riding on this meeting. Bargaining with the killer. Betraying everything Locke learned from the OWG. The murder of a Guard. The plan to get Jade to an abortion.

By the time Locke got on the road, it was well past ten o’clock. No need to worry about being tracked; he was mandated to see Hamilton. If anything, this would even lend more credibility to his future lie that he had nothing to do with Hamilton’s breakout. A subject couldn’t be tracked if he were going to break out a prisoner.

His guts were still a question and desperation dominated him. This was an even more overt act against the OWG than his other indiscretions. His first un-mandated visit to Hamilton paled in comparison to this. Lying to Hiss about the trip to the library was

nothing now. Keeping those messages a secret didn't rise to breaking an Agent-killer from prison.

But busting him out was the plan. The only plan if he couldn't persuade Hamilton any other way. It still had some problems, but Locke hoped Hamilton might be able to add some input to pull it off. Hamilton was the real criminal, after all.

Counting the Symbols as he passed them, he still needed an answer to what those were. A shaky laugh emerged--he was certainly hoping for a lot in this meeting with Hamilton. An explanation for the Symbols . . . how all the sites related to each other . . . and . . .

. . . oh yeah, can you help Jade get an abortion?

The Homicide workers had long since gone to their living quarters as he pulled into the parking lot. A bus passed within feet of his parked automobile. Locke caught a glimpse of the subjects sitting in the back. Heads down, not looking at each other. He couldn't wait to ask Hamilton about that.

Locke grabbed the envelopes, the messages, and his keys. He took his Homicide badge but left the scanner and cellular phone in the car.

Like before, Locke got in with his spare Homicide key. He flipped on the general office light. He noticed somebody else had already moved into his old office space. The Homicide Division of Gambling City moved on, and so had Locke. But he still found himself returning to this place.

A week ago bringing the case to a close would have solved their problem.

Now he expected Hamilton to help him and Jade out of their situation even if it meant a murder and letting Hamilton go in the process.

My, how things had changed.

CHAPTER 36

Locke hesitated, his hands on the last set of double doors. His stomach felt like an empty bag being filled with anxiety. He dreaded seeing the face of the guard on duty. The guard who wouldn't leave the building alive if Locke predicted the future with any accuracy. But Locke was putting himself at risk as well. No bars to protect him. No shackles on Hamilton. Even riskier if Hamilton knew who caused his torture: Govicide Agents Hiss and Locke.

Hamilton might feel revenge was in order. What better way to do it than to kill an Agent who caused it?

Locke continued to hesitate. Opening these doors would put into motion a chain of events that could get Locke and Jade off the hook. But it would also let a Govicide Agent murderer free. And get a Guard killed. His knees shook like loose hinges.

He was wasting time.

Pushing the doors ajar, his hands wouldn't let go of the door handles. A guard stood at the post.

Ned.

A surge of despair rose in Locke, anxiety now brimming over. He felt like ripping the handles off the steel doors. He wanted to push each door right through the walls.

This Guard, a male Locke knew well, would be die by Hamilton's hand tonight.

"Govicide Agent Locke? Is everything alright?" Ned called out.

Locke waited, contemplating whether he could go through with this. He'd anticipated a Guard working who he didn't know.

"Uh, yeah, Ned." He stayed between the doors, holding them open. "Something came to mind. That's all."

Ned stepped from behind the podium. "What are you doing here? Why are you not dressed in black?" He bowed.

The bowing only made Locke feel worse. He held onto the doors to keep himself upright. He ignored Ned's last question. "You don't have to bow. I won't tell." Locke said.

"Are you sure you are alright?" Ned took a few steps down the hall.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine." Gaining his balance, Locke allowed the doors to close behind him. With each meandering stride, he agonized his way to Ned.

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'm fine." Locke leaned his elbow on the podium. He avoided Ned's interested gaze, fearing the Guard might see Locke was up to something.

"Almost did not recognize you, Govicide Agent Locke. Weird, huh? I see you for years dressed as a Detective. Then, I see you in Agent black. And the first time I see you in detective clothes again I am not sure it is you."

"Sometimes I don't even recognize myself, Ned." Did this male really have to die?

"What brings you here tonight? You just missed your fellow Agents by an hour. They had a torture session with Hamilton."

Bad news but maybe not. The pain might motivate Hamilton to help Locke without a lot of convincing. Still, he was the reason Hamilton got tortured in the first place. “Really?” A fake sigh accentuated the word.

“Yeah. Pretty good session, too. Lots of screaming and yelling. Those Agents brass knuckles were pretty bloody when they left.”

It took all Locke’s strength not to cringe. “I am glad to hear it. Very good to hear. Well, I have a few questions of my own for Hamilton since Agents are not unmandated to see him now.”

“Govicide Agent Locke, I do not think you are going to get much out of him. Maybe you should come back tomorrow.”

Though Ned was unknowingly on the edge of death, he was being helpful to his executioner.

“No. I have to do this now.”

“Okay, whatever you say, Govicide Agent Locke.” Ned pulled the keys out of his pocket.

Locke glanced at the floor, remorse overflowing in him, and Ned wasn’t even dead yet. “Please, just call me, Locke. Okay? Hiss isn’t here. Nobody’s recording this. We’ve known each other for a while. Call me what you’ve always called me.”

The Guard paused mid-stride to the doors. “You sure?”

“Yes.” Locke wanted to tell Ned to leave Homicide as soon as the doors were unlocked. He wanted to tell him to run far away. Two blocks. Five blocks. Ten blocks. He didn’t want Ned to die.

But, without the guard’s death, no one would believe Hamilton escaped on his own.

Ned unlocked the doors and gave the keys to Locke.

“Ned, I have to ask. What are you doing here tonight? Since when do you work nights?”

“I requested it, Govicide . . . sorry . . . Locke. You inspired me to be a better subject of the Masses. A better servant to the OWG. If a detective can become a Govicide Agent, then I can show more allegiance to the OWG as well. So, I started picking up extra shifts. So, I am here.”

Locke should’ve never asked the question. He patted Ned’s shoulder, turning his head so Ned wouldn’t see his worried eyes. “That’s . . .very good . . . of you.” A prickly ball inflated in his throat. “I want you to know I always thought you did great work serving the OWG. You are a good Guard, Ned.”

“Thanks, Locke. That means a lot to me.” Ned answered.

Locke unlocked the first door, leaving Ned behind. Once Ned went outside of sight, Locke collapsed against the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, prisoners in the first two cells watched him, but said nothing. They lay on their cots, resting.

Fourteen Agents. A spy. And now a Guard. How many casualties were needed? All started by one male: Hamilton.

No, that wasn’t true, his conscience reminded him. Fourteen Agents, yes.

The spy? Not exactly. Hiss ran him over in his own tantrum.

Ned? He’d be Locke’s fault. He’d lead Hamilton to Ned and Hamilton would do the rest. Hamilton’s hand would kill Ned, but Locke’s mind conjured the idea.

But Locke felt the choice was clear: Jade was more important than Ned. Ned needed to die so Jade and Locke could live.

Locke straightened himself. The thought of Jade not having to deal with the fetus strengthened him. This was about Jade. And somebody had to die for her to live. This was the way it had to be. Locke liked Ned. But he loved Jade.

Locke began the long walk to the last cell. His heartbeat pounded three times faster than his footsteps. The keys jingled in his pocket.

This time, as he neared Hamilton's cell, Locke didn't hear the murderers voice. No mumbling. No murmuring. No reciting. He guessed the recent torture session had something do with it.

Hamilton wouldn't resemble the healthy male Locke saw before. A week of torture involving probable sleep deprivation, drugging, physical and mental violence, and hunger would leave the murderer in sorry shape. He might even be delusional.

Locke wouldn't show sympathy, though he respected Hamilton. Hamilton, no matter what he'd done, had opened Locke's eyes. Locke didn't agree with Hamilton's beliefs and motives, but he respected him for telling him more about the World. And there was still so much to learn from him.

First, though, was the jailbreak.

Striding along the bars of the cell, he looked in. On his cot, Hamilton lay on his left side facing the cell wall. His feet were nearest Locke. Locke couldn't hear him breathing, and for a moment he thought the Agents might have killed him. If Hamilton were dead, some Agents would be in big OWG trouble.

His left foot moved. Good, he was still alive.

Hamilton didn't seem to sense Locke's presence. He stretched out his legs then his arms. He made a grimacing sound and rubbed his right knee, probably injured in the torture session.

This male was human after all.

Curling up once again, Hamilton cleared his throat a couple of times and coughed. He wiped his mouth with his right arm. When he put his arm down, Locke saw the sleeve was bloodied.

Never so vividly did the OWG get to see how subjects acted behind the scenes. Not even the System could track what everyone said or how everyone acted out of sight. The Masses still retained some privacy within their own living quarters. The OWG would find a way to get rid of that as well, since all Offender movements got started under a subject's own roof.

Now, he saw behind Hamilton's proverbial curtain. The murderer wasn't aware Locke stood there watching him. No attitude. No posturing. No sarcasm.

However, Locke had a plan to hatch.

"Hamilton . . . hey . . . Hamilton . . . wake up," he called out.

The murderer jerked and peered over his right shoulder. Locke glimpsed Hamilton's face and tried not to react. The left side of his face was a bruise of purple and black. His left eye was swollen shut.

"Govicide Agent Locke?" A slur ruined Hamilton's deep voice. His voice sounded more like a synthetic computer-generated voice Locke might hear on an OWG television commercial.

Locke didn't answer.

"You should see the other guy," Hamilton mumbled.

"What?"

“It’s a joke,” Hamilton added. “I kind of rammed my face into an Agent’s fist.” His pained smile showed some of his perfect teeth were missing.

“Oh. I get it.” Locke answered, his eyes darting from Hamilton’s smile to the floor. Then, back to Hamilton again.

“You got a lot of courage showing up here.” Hamilton propped himself up on an elbow, groaning. Unlike the male who moved smoothly around the cell not long ago, this Hamilton moved like someone twice his age.

“Courage? Why?” Locke asked. He already knew the answer, but did the topic have to arise so soon?

“Well, you are the reason I had all this done to me, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t know I was causing that to happen.” Locke pointed to Hamilton’s face.

“But it wouldn’t have stopped you even if you knew, right?”

What was there to say? Locke couldn’t turn down an assignment.

Hamilton didn’t wait for an answer. “That’s okay. If I knew you were going to get tortured I wouldn’t have stopped my murders either.” Hamilton sat up. “But, there were many times over the last week where . . . well . . . you get the idea.” Hamilton wiped his mouth. Talking seemed to cause it to bleed more.

“You wanted to do to me what you did to those fourteen others?”

“Yep. You got it. And Govicide Agent Hiss, too. We can’t forget about him, can we?” Hamilton’s tattered eyebrows danced on his forehead.

Hamilton still had a sense of humor. The scoundrel in him still existed. The torturers hadn’t erased it.

“No, can’t forget about him,” Locke said. Hiss seemed a subject on which he and Hamilton could agree.

“So, Govicide Agent Locke, you just missed your comrades. You going to beat on me on your own?”

“Even if I was here for that, it wouldn’t work, would it?” Locke asked. He already knew that answer, too.

“No, it wouldn’t. But how would you know that?” Hamilton tried to rise, but only got off the cot a few inches before sagging back to the mattress.

“How do I know? I know because I’m still out here and not behind these bars. If those Agents couldn’t get out of you that Jade’s pregnant through non-credit sex they’ll never get anything out of you.”

“Hmmm, good point.” Hamilton successfully lifted himself off the cot this time.

“And, I’m sure by this time you know that for a while Agents weren’t allowed anywhere near you. And you obviously didn’t tell them about me being here a week ago either. So . . .”

“Another good point, Govicide Agent Locke.” The murderer limped around the cell.

“Why?” Locke fit his face between the bars. The cool bars chilled his cheeks.

“Why what?” Hamilton eased himself into his chair, facing Locke.

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

Hamilton rubbed his left shoulder, wincing. “Just to see if I could do it.”

“C’mon now, Hamilton,” Locke kicked the bars. “For the fun of it?”

“Okay, you caught me on that one. I have my reasons. None of which I can reveal to you.”

“Well, if you don’t reveal them to me now, how will I ever know? It’s not like Govicide won’t keep you alive forever.”

“I think you already know. You’re just not aware of it yet.” Hamilton stood, pushing himself off the chair. His legs didn’t appear to have enough strength to lift his body on their own.

Locke rummaged through his experiences. He had suspicions but no knowledge. “No, I don’t think I know.”

“Well, you should. But, let’s put that away for now. Why are you here tonight if it isn’t to torture me?” Rubbing his left knee, Hamilton stretched his legs.

“I am here to . . . give . . . you something.” Locke’s spine felt like one of those iron bars. He couldn’t back down now.

“Give me something? I could really go for a beer right now.”

“Beer?” Locke narrowed his eyes.

“Never mind. Let me guess,” Hamilton limped to the bars, “I have to do something in return?”

For a moment, Locke thought he heard movement in the corridor. A quick glance revealed nothing. “Yes, you have to reciprocate.” Locke nodded.

“You are the reason I got tortured for the last week. How can I trust you?”

“For the same reason you didn’t tell those Agents about Jade being pregnant.” This was even tougher than he thought. His words got stuck in his dry throat. “You could’ve helped yourself out with those Agents but you said nothing about Jade.”

“You’re right. But, like I said, I have my reasons.” Hamilton sat back down. He tried to put his hands on the back of his head but his injuries prevented it. He placed them in his lap.

Locke gripped the bars harder. “And I have my own reasons for asking. But I want to tell you the whole story first.”

“Go ahead. I haven’t heard a good story lately.” Hamilton crossed his arms.

Locke started at the beginning with Jade’s pregnancy test. His interview with the Director, and how he planned to ask for leniency. Then his idea to solve Hamilton’s case and receive authorization for Jade’s abortion without penalties. He finished by explaining how everything fell apart when he realized the case wouldn’t be solved in the time allotted. Plus, Jade’s suicide attempt.

Hamilton remained silent, massaging his shoulders, rotating his neck. He nodded at the correct points and shook his head in others.

“ . . . and I came home just in time to stop her from committing suicide. That’s when I decided I needed to ask you for a favor.” Five minutes of talking and Locke’s vocal chords felt scarred.

Hamilton’s expression changed. At least, Locke thought it did. It was hard to tell through the bruise.

“And how is she? How is Jade now?” Hamilton stood, favoring his right leg. Whatever the Agents did to his knee would cause Hamilton to hobble for a while, maybe indefinitely, not that Hamilton had long to live anyway.

“She’s fine. I wouldn’t have left her if I thought she might hurt herself again.”

Hamilton walked around the cell, his right legs scuffling. “Lots of bad luck in that story.”

“You could say that.”

“Where do I fit in all this? And more importantly, what do I get in return?”

Locke was about to do the worst thing one of the Masses could do: Make a deal with an Offender. Yet, he felt no guilt. This was the only way out. It was un-mandated and would get Ned killed, but he had already weighed the choices.

“I know what the OWG charts say about you. Well, before the torture. You are healthier than anyone they have ever seen. No matter if you’re twenty-five, or thirty-five, or forty-five. I mean, we don’t know how old you are.”

“I’m thirty-nine.” Hamilton stopped for a second to grin at Locke then continued creeping around his cell.

“Thirty-nine? Older than I thought. Well, that proves my point. You’re fit, but there’s no record of you. Never been to an OWG hospital. Never got medicine through the System or from the OWG. So, you must . . .” Locke took a chance. “. . . as a Free Enterpriser . . . have some kind of medical setup on your own.”

“You think I’m a Free Enterpriser?” Hamilton lowered his head, keeping his eyes on Locke.

“You said it before. I thought I might as well as say it for myself.”

“Right, right.” Hamilton nodded. “That certainly got your attention. But, really, as described and defined by the OWG, we aren’t Free Enterprisers.”

“Well, in any case, you’ve been getting medical care outside of the System, right?” With each word, his talking became tougher, as if time was slowing down.

“True. No denying that. There’s no doctor in the OWG who could keep me in this condition. Not with its technology.”

“But, the OWG has the best technology.” Locke retorted.

Hamilton stopped behind his chair. “How do I put this, Govicide Agent Locke? OWG technology is not OWG technology. It’s old Free Enterpriser technology.”

The footprints gleamed in Locke’s head. “Yes, somehow I knew that.” He nodded. For once, an un-mandated sentence of Hamilton’s made sense. But he had no time for it right now. First things first. “I want to know if you can direct me on how I can get medical care for Jade.”

Hamilton opened his right eye wider. “Why?”

“She can’t go to a OWG facility because it’ll show up on the System.”

“I know how the OWG works. But I’m confused. Is she sick?”

“No. She needs an abortion.”

“Sorry,” Hamilton hung his head and shook it. “I can’t help you, Govicide Agent Locke.” Then, as if his injuries healed, Hamilton walked over to the bars.

“Why not? Is it because I’m a Govicide Agent?” Locke slapped the bars.

“I just can’t.”

“Why?” Locke’s chest touched the steel holding Hamilton inside.

“Because we don’t believe in abortion.”

“What do you mean you don’t believe in it? Abortions exist. I’m sure you’ve heard of them.”

“Oh, Govicide Agent Locke, we know what they are. We just don’t believe in performing them.” Hamilton shook his head as if the mere thought disturbed him.

What did that mean? Abortions were as common as a tooth extraction in the OWG. And both were treated the same way: an operation.

“It’s because I caused you to get tortured that you won’t help, isn’t it?” No disguise could cover Locke’s feelings now.

“I’m telling you, it’s not.”

“You’d help one of the Masses, wouldn’t you? Someone else out there who wasn’t working for Govicide trying to stop you and all your others.” Locke heard his own desperation.

“No, Govicide Agent Locke, I wouldn’t.”

“You kill fourteen Agents but you don’t believe in abortions? You made a lot of subjects suffer.”

Hamilton came closer. “What do you care about that? You did a study about how certain murders shouldn’t be investigated because it might cost the OWG too many credits.”

“That’s different. We Agents are out there making sure Offenders like you aren’t taking away everything from the Masses. We’re special because without us subjects would die!”

“You mean . . . like me?” Hamilton’s blank stare cut through Locke like a guillotine.

Dang, he caught Locke in a contradiction.

“Do you really think you’re better than everyone else, Locke?” Hamilton dropped the “Govicide Agent” title. “That all you Agents are so much better that each one of your murders should be investigated? But for the Masses, well, you’ll have to do a few calculations first. Do you think because you passed some test . . . oh, wait a minute, that’s right, you didn’t pass the test. You failed, right? But just because Agents pass some test, it makes them better? More valuable? More important?”

“I don’t have to listen to this.” Locke backed away from Hamilton. “Are you going to help me or not?”

“Michael, what don’t you understand? I can’t.” Hamilton shrugged his shoulders. Locke wanted to feel hatred from the male in front of him but he felt nothing of the sort. Instead, he felt genuine caring and sympathy coming from Hamilton.

But, Locke had put off the inevitable for long enough. “I’ll let you go.” As soon as the words were out, he no longer felt parched, his hands stopped shaking, and his anxiety disappeared. But this wasn’t over yet.

Hamilton opened his mouth, and paused. He seemed to consider the proposition for a second. “Let me go? You mean, let me walk right out of here?” Hamilton lowered his voice. He tried to peek around the corner, perhaps to see if this was some type of setup.

“There’s no one out here but me, Hamilton. This is my plan. My girlcomrade needs an abortion.” A warm feeling replaced all those others, from his toes to his head. The feeling that he was doing everything he could to help himself and Jade. That he didn’t cave in the face of incomprehensible pressure.

“And this is all so you can stay on as an Agent and the two of you don’t get in trouble?”

“Yes.” Was Hamilton going to do this for him after all?

“You’d have to make it look like a breakout, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s what I thought, too. We could work together on this.”

“And the guard?”

Ned . . . just bad luck Locke told himself again. The thought caused Locke to look down the hall. “You’d have to kill him, because I’m not sure the OWG would believe a murderer broke out and let anyone live.”

As before, Hamilton seemed to think about it, rolling his neck one way then the other. Locke estimated getting out of there would be a hard reward to pass up.

“Just to be clear. You want me to kill, or assist me in killing, a guard so I can break out and take your girlcomrade to get an abortion in order for you to keep being a Govicide Agent?”

“Yes.”

Hamilton stepped to his right. He and Locke were almost nose-to-nose. “You know this is how it starts, don’t you?”

“How what starts?”

“This is how the OWG started. How the System started. How Govicide started.”

These three sentences bothered Locke, but he kept his face blank and unreadable. They bothered him because, as he suspected for a week now, Hamilton knew a lot that Locke didn’t.

“I don’t need a history lesson, Hamilton. You going to do this or not?”

“A history lesson? It wouldn’t be a history lesson, per say. It would be a lesson in humanity and how good ideas go bad.”

Locke re-assessed his situation. He expected Hamilton, like any prisoner, to jump at the chance to break out of the prison. Locke had the keys, a plan, all of it, and still the killer hesitated.

“You don’t trust me, do you Hamilton? You think I’m going to break you out of here and then turn on you, right? You think I’m making this whole thing up?”

Hamilton retreated to his chair. “You misread me. I think I can trust you more than any person I know inside the OWG. That’s not saying much but it’s something.”

“Then, let’s get you out of here. Get Jade her abortion and we can all go back to the way things were.” Locke dug in his pocket for Ned’s keys.

“Didn’t you hear me? We don’t do abortions.”

CHAPTER 37

Locke pulled the keys out before he heard the last sentence. Hamilton said it before but something this time caught Locke's attention. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. I am," Hamilton nodded.

"But abortion is just a surgical procedure." He stood with the key pointing at the lock to the cell, hoping to insert it soon.

"The reason we don't do abortions is because we view a fetus as a human. It's alive. And because of that, we believe that humans have rights. And a human shouldn't be killed because he's inconvenient or a mistake."

The killer must be joking. Did he say a fetus--a glob of cells and blood smaller than the size of a fist--was a human? And that word again. Rights.

"A fetus is a human? But it can't talk, walk, or even look human. How can you classify it as one?"

Hamilton limped to the cell door. "Let me ask you something? When does life start?" "When the baby is born." Locke still held the keys in front of him. Maybe he should just unlock the door and force Hamilton out.

"Okay, fair enough. When the baby comes out, it's still attached by the umbilical cord. Is it alive?"

"Yes."

"Okay. So, whether the baby is inside Jade or not is the determination of whether it is alive or not?"

"Yes."

"Even though the baby looks like a human, has a heartbeat, has eyes, feels pain, all of that, it is still not alive? It's kicking against Jade's stomach but it's still not a human?"

"Yes."

"Does a subject feel pain?"

"Of course."

"Do babies look like subjects?"

"Of course they do."

"Do subjects have the ability to kick? If they have legs, that is."

"Yes."

"Do subjects have a heartbeat?"

"Yes."

"And you know when fetuses are within minutes of being born they have dreams, right?"

"I've heard that."

"Do humans have dreams when they sleep?"

"Yes."

"So, even though this fetus inside a woman, say that woman is Jade, has many of the characteristics of a baby outside of the woman, it's not a real human? It's not living?"

Locke opened his mouth to answer then stopped. He was stumped.

Never had questions like these been posed to him. Things seemed so clear cut. In a female, just a thing. Outside of a female, a living baby. "I don't know--"

Hamilton continued, "See, Govicide Agent Locke," Hamilton grimaced rubbing his knee again, "we believe life begins at conception. As a result, we don't believe in killing innocent humans." Hamilton pointed at Locke, then at himself to drive home the point.

"But, the fetus at four weeks. It doesn't kick. It doesn't look like a subject. It's nothing." The keys slowly fell to Locke's side.

"Good point. But then tell me--when does that fetus become a human?"

"When it comes out." The keys fell farther.

"But, you just said a baby outside the womb and a baby seconds from being born have the same characteristics? That can't be the answer."

The key to the cell ended up pointed straight at the ground, along with Locke's hopes.

Hamilton sighed, "Do you even think about it? Life? Don't you see the OWG is all about death? Abortions. Sex credits. Executions. Torture. This is what happens when a civilization doesn't embrace life."

Anger replaced hope in Locke, and it was rising. "Life? Who is talking to who about life? You killed fourteen Agents." He almost spit at the murderer.

"And I'm doing my time. Or have you forgotten about these bars?" Hamilton tapped on them.

"But those Agents were innocent. What did they ever do to you?" Anger rose a little more. The cell key became a weapon in Locke's right hand. He wanted to poke Hamilton in the other eye.

"They have done a lot to people like me. People like that have been doing a lot to people like me for centuries, since the beginning of time. They've enslaved and killed billions."

Locke slapped the bars. "Don't say that. There was nothing before the OWG."

"Of course, what am I saying?" Hamilton rolled his good eye. "That's a topic for another time. But, don't beat yourself up too bad. Even if you weren't asking me to get Jade an abortion, I couldn't leave. You're right. I killed those Agents and I deserve the penalty. I knew what I was getting into before I did it."

Locke stuck the keys in his pocket. "Fine. Stay here. Just tell me where I can take Jade. The Guard doesn't have to die. And I'll do something else to help you out." Locke's anger had dissipated, but he was pleading now.

"You don't understand, Govicide Agent Locke. Our facilities don't do those procedures. We don't perform abortions, period. We don't believe in them. That's the way it is. I'm sure one of our people could figure out how to do one, but they won't because we all believe it's wrong."

"You're serious," Locke backed up and rested against the wall opposite the cell. "You're not doing this to harass me. You're really serious?"

"Deadly."

Closing his eyes, Locke drummed his head against the wall. If Hamilton couldn't help, no one could get he and Jade out of this jam. The muscles in his arms and legs cramped as deliberating took its toll.

"What are you going to do?" Hamilton asked after several seconds of silence.

Locke felt like the prisoner, and Hamilton was the Agent. “I don’t know. I really don’t. Confess to Stallings? Take Jade to an abortion facility and take a chance it won’t appear on the System? I’m not sure.”

“Can’t say I envy you, Govicide Agent Locke. At least I’m in here because of my principles. Because of my values. This is where they have gotten me, but I’m content. I knew what I was in for. But you, everything you believe in has gotten you one step away from Govicide Prison. You’re desperate. The ideas you believe in are going to get you imprisoned.”

Locke analyzed this male before him. Here was Hamilton, a male who had an eye swollen shut, a hobbled knee, a bad arm, missing teeth, and who could expect more of the same, and the murderer seemed as comfortable as ever. “Hamilton, who are you?”

“Me? Just a man. Like you, but with different experiences.” Hamilton stretched out his arms, wincing when they reached full extension.

Locke shook his head. “Don’t be coy with me. I followed you. I caught you. I interrogated you. We’ve talked before. You gave me information you didn’t have to. You’re more than that. Who are you?”

Hamilton didn’t answer right away. Five seconds passed. Ten. Fifteen. “I am the way people used to be. I am the way people should be. I am the way people will be . . . maybe. That’s what I would say. Some of the others, well, they’d say I was suicidal, taking on this task even though everyone knew somebody had to do it.”

Locke didn’t get the answer he desired. He didn’t blame Hamilton. No words from the murderer, or anybody else, could make his predicament go away. But, exactly how many more of him was there?

Hamilton backed up to his chair and sat. “You seem disappointed. What did you want me to say?”

“I’m not sure.” Locke stared at his feet, seeing cracks in the concrete, like the cracks forming in his life, breaking the solid foundation he’d tried to build over the last thirty years.

Hamilton’s voice lowered. “You’re pressed for time. The Director might get the news tonight, tomorrow or the next day about Jade’s pregnancy. But if I were you, I would want to go down with questions answered. You have many of them, correct?”

Locke’s conscience told him to run home to Jade and wait for the end. He turned his right foot back toward the Guard’s station. Jade needed him more than ever. He still believed in the OWG and felt loyal to it. It gave him everything. Without it, he was nothing.

But his curiosity kept his left foot still, glued to the floor, like a thousand OWG Manuals pinned it down. An OWG bus couldn’t have moved it. Maybe something Hamilton said could still get he and Jade out of this. Maybe Hamilton would slip and reveal an escape hatch, even if his comrades didn’t believe in abortion.

“Okay, one question.” Locke turned and face Hamilton.

“Great. Fire away. But keep in mind, I can’t answer any questions about the cash or why I killed those particular Agents. It would really mess everything up. You could get caught and I don’t think you’d survive questioning as well as I have.”

“I understand.” Locke coaxed his right foot toward Hamilton’s cell. “What is the Symbol and why doesn’t anyone notice it?”

“Ohhhhh,” Hamilton cackled, “good one. You saw them all around, didn’t you?”

“Everywhere. Even on the tundra up there outside Snow City.” Locke shivered, remembering the weather. Or it could have been because of his current circumstances.

“I heard about that one. Never saw it myself. I think it’s the largest one ever created. Well, the reason no one sees them? Hmmm . . . it kind of started as a joke. Somebody, long time ago, before me even, stated that the Masses never seemed to notice anything besides the OWG and their Goods and Services. Everything else was invisible. Irrelevant. Kind of like they were brainwashed. You don’t realize what that means. But anyway, these guys turned it into a contest. They started drawing little Symbols here and there. Before long, everybody joined in. And they were right. The Masses didn’t notice them. But, we realized we would eventually know when a subject was starting to come around when he started spotting the Symbols on his own. It would show us that the OWG spell was beginning to weaken. And now, I guess, we found out we were right. You saw the Symbols and now you’re asking me about them.”

“So, what is it? Where did it come from? And why did someone draw them on the messages I got? All these sayings about the future and something will be where nothing is. And about my last name.” One at a time, Locke cautioned himself, one at a time.

“I don’t know what to tell you about the messages.” Hamilton shrugged. “Sounds to me like one of us is having fun with you. And giving you really good clues as to where the cash went and what the future holds. But I can’t talk to you about that.”

“Not even a hint?” Locke asked.

“No. And don’t push me.” Hamilton glared.

“Okay, okay. So what is it?”

“It started as a graph. And it--”

Locke interrupted, almost coming out of his shoes. “A graph?”

“Yes. At least that’s how it started.”

Spinning a quick three-sixty, Locke laughed. It felt good. “That’s what Jade guessed.”

“Smart gal. I can see why you two are together,” Hamilton replied. “But the Symbol started over a hundred and thirty years ago. Probably longer ago than that. It’s called the Laffer Curve.”

“A hundred and thirty years ago? Impossible. I thought you were going to tell me the truth.” Locke’s hands went to his hips. His relaxed face turned to a frown.

“Let’s get this out of the way. I tried to tell you this in our first conversation.” Hamilton took a deep breath. He placed a hand on his ribcage, feeling around. Maybe he had a broken rib too. “There was a civilization—many--civilizations before the OWG. To explain would take hours. Hours you don’t have. Suffice it to say that everything you see out there in the OWG, even this building, wasn’t built by the OWG. Someone else built it. Actually, something else built all of it.”

“Footprints . . .” The single word escaped Locke. For a moment, he was reminded of standing in the middle of the Snow City intersection.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Locke waved his hand at Hamilton. “Just a thought I had in Snow City.”

“Okay . . . can I continue?” Hamilton queried, obviously confused.

“Please.”

“Great,” Hamilton got to his feet and limped around his chair, his thoughts seeming to give him renewed energy. “I could tell you exactly where the Laffer came from but I’d

be using a bunch of words you'd never understand. I take that back. You would recognize the words, but the ways I put them together wouldn't make sense. Let's just say it started off as a government credits idea. But over time, what people before the OWG found out was that this Curve represented a bigger idea. More profound. Something that could be expanded to all areas of life. What it really explains is there is a . . . what would I call it? A sweet spot? Do you know what that means?"

Locke nodded, "I've heard the expression."

"Good. Okay." Hamilton's head bent down, seemingly deep in thought. "Well, the Curve represents a sweet spot, the top of that Curve, where rights can be expressed and rights can be protected at the same time. And--"

Locke interrupted. "Rights? What are those?"

He'd come full circle back to where his curiosity with Hamilton started. Not more than two hundred yards away, ten days ago. The first sentence he heard Hamilton speak.

Hamilton's working eye shot a glance. "Did I use that word? I guess I did. I've said it so many times in my life it's become second nature." He coughed. A bit of blood came out. "Do I have time?"

"Make it quick," Locke demanded.

"Well, you don't believe that humans are any different than animals, correct?"

"Of course not. Humans are only smarter animals." This was sixth grade material.

"So, you don't think humans are unique and different from animals. Okay. And you don't believe there is something bigger than this World. There is some, wow, how do I explain this? You don't believe there is some Super Being, a God, out there who created humans and everything else on this planet?"

Locke thought the question funny. Everyone knew a huge explosion created the universe, and thus humans. "A Super Being? Like a human who can fly? A subject who can live forever? I'm not sure what you mean."

Hamilton almost tipped over his head shook so fast, "Not exactly. Rights? What are they? Animals are born into anarchy. They don't have the ability to form some kind of agreement with other species who hunt them. The fast dominate the slow. The large consume the small. The many destroy the few. Whereas, humans can communicate with each other. We realize we don't have to live like that. We make agreements that eventually become governments. And the government's job is to make sure we continue to be human. What makes us human are rights. And the overriding theme of all rights is that no one is a servant to another. Everyone is equal. You can't force me to do anything for you. I can't force you to do anything for me. Moreover, something cannot be a right if it forces someone to act. Rights are the opposite of force. The top of the curve marks where rights are maximized but some type of order is kept as well." In the air, Hamilton used his finger to draw an invisible Symbol. He pointed to the top of it to make his point.

"I don't get it. Nobody's ever heard of these rights. And the OWG gets along just fine."

"You get along just fine, Govicide Agent Locke? Compared to what?"

Locke had no answer, no comparison because the OWG was the only thing he knew. It wasn't like being able to compare two females. One fat, one skinny. One tall, one short. One white, one mixed race.

Hamilton continued. "This cell. What if this was the only home I knew? For all the years I've been alive. I was born in it. Raised in it. Slept here. Fed here. Went to the

bathroom here. Like I'm doing now. Would it still be bad? Or, would I accept my existence as the way things were since everyone lived like this? I'd probably accept it as being the status quo, wouldn't I?"

"Sure. I suppose. You'd probably accept it as the way every human lived."

Hamilton hobbled his way close to Locke. "And what if I told you, Govicide Agent Locke, the only reason you accept the way you live is because you don't know a different life? You accept it because you can't imagine anything else. But even though you can't imagine anything else, doesn't mean another way to live doesn't exist."

But the Masses were getting everything. Who could want more? "I don't . . ."

"In your world, the doctor is a slave to the patient, all in an effort by the OWG to get healthcare to everyone. Is the doctor not equal to the patient? Are they both human or not?" Hamilton held his arms out to his sides, palms upturned. "The bus driver is a slave to the passenger. The OWG farmer is a slave to the Masses because they need to eat. The OWG laborer is a slave to the Masses because they need their clothes. Everyone is forced in the OWG to do something for someone else all in the name of Goods and Services. But, that doesn't make it okay. All it means is that you are all slaves. All of you at the beck and call of the OWG. Of the Exalted Ruler, the Czars, the Govicide Director."

Thinking about the answer, Locke pinched his lips. The Masses had food delivered to their living quarters like prisoners. The Masses were allowed to use water at certain times due to water conservation, and prisoners had the same restrictions. The Masses were allowed to have sex if they had sex credits but it meant a subject could go a long time without any contact, as prisoners had to do.

A couple of thoughts were enough to cause Locke to question why he didn't see the similarities before. Locke bit his lip hard enough to bleed.

Hamilton continued. "I see the wheels inside you turning. Are you comparing how you live to how I live now, Govicide Agent Locke? Is that why you're so quiet?" He cocked his head to one side. "It's okay. You don't know any better. At least you can live in some sort of ignorance. Me? I understand there is a way to live which is so superior to the OWG it makes me want to cry. Yes, murderers cry, too. And that kind of civilization used to exist on this Earth—the name for this planet—not too long ago. A little more than a hundred years."

Locke tasted the blood from his lip. "But the World was in anarchy a hundred years ago."

"When a government wants total control, it will call anything anarchy." Hamilton seemed to push Locke's statement aside like he'd heard it a thousand times before. "I'll give you an example, Govicide Agent Locke. What's your girl's name again?"

"What does she have to do with this?" Locke remembered his race against the clock. But he wanted more information. He needed more information.

"Nothing. It's just an example. I'm not going to say anything bad about her."

Locke squinted his eyes. "Her name's Jade."

"Okay," Hamilton leaned against the bars. "I'm going to give you a very real world example, even in this messed up World of the OWG. A real world example of what the Curve represents. Obviously, you and Jade have a good relationship. And both of you have done what it takes to stay together. But let's say, after you met the first time, you never called her again. Never tried to contact her. Sure, you were interested in her but you never did anything to show your feelings. You wouldn't be with her now, right?"

“Of course not.” Where was this going?

“Now, say you saw her somewhere. You met her. You liked her. And you went out with her. But instead of ignoring her, you did the opposite. You followed her everywhere. You called her every half hour. You showed up at her work. You arrived unexpectedly at her living quarters. Would you still be a couple?”

“Not a chance. She would never have gone out with me again and probably would’ve reported me to the Local Authorities.”

“So, the absolute hands-off approach doesn’t work.” Hamilton put out one hand to signify the first example. “And the one hundred percent hands-on approach does not work either.” Then, he stuck his other hand out. “You get the same results. What does that tell you?” Hamilton pointed at Locke.

Locke blinked. “I guess the best approach is probably something different. Something in between the two.”

Hamilton slapped his hands together. “Exactly right, Govicide Agent Locke. Exactly right.”

Locke stepped back, Hamilton’s exuberance surprising him. For a second, the murderer looked like a little kid. “I’m sorry, Hamilton, but I don’t understand.”

“In the first instance, there is no control. You don’t contact her. You show no interest. You could call that an anarchical relationship because it’s not a relationship at all. On the other hand, where you try to control her and she sees you too much, you could call it a dictatorial relationship. Totally opposite actions, but in the end they get you the same thing. No relationship at all. When really, the best way to have a relationship, even in a government sense, is somewhere in between. And we believe that the OWG is to the far side of the Laffer Curve. Too much control. Too much OWG interference. Controlling what subjects read. Controlling what subjects watch. Controlling what subjects say. Controlling when subjects can have sex. It’s like being in a relationship with a subject who won’t leave you alone. The problem is that the Masses don’t want out of the relationship because they’ve become dependent. They don’t know how to provide for themselves, so they take whatever will provide for them. And that’s the OWG.”

Locke had a notion to smack his own forehead. The memories over saturated his mind. Flash after flash. Images from growing up. The OWG getting in the way. Images as a teenager. The OWG being everywhere. But at the same time, being told, “You can’t live without the OWG.”

Locke understood Hamilton’s comparison now. He remembered other males talking about breaking up with females, and these females saying, “You won’t be able to live without me.” Of course, it was stupid to say. The males went on living; they found someone else. The same for the females.

That was what the OWG was saying, though. Without its help, humans would die. But here Hamilton had moved on from the OWG relationship and he was fine. He found another relationship. With something else.

Locke’s final flash was a picture of him sitting in his automobile that night in the parking lot watching the two buses go by. The subjects staring down at the floor of the bus. Not giving any attention to the subjects around them. Locke knew what they looked like now.

They all looked like subjects who were in a bad relationship. Beaten down by the fights. The disagreements. The contradictions. The restrictions. But, still believing they needed to survive by continuing to stay in a relationship with whatever tormented them.

But those bus riders hadn't been beaten down by their girlcomrade or boycomrade. They weren't just beaten down by one part of their life. They were beaten down by life, period. They were beaten down by their circumstances. They were beaten down by the OWG.

And they had no choice but to follow it.

Locke bowed his head. He gazed at his feet. "But how can that be? The OWG means well. How can giving everything to everyone cause subjects to feel like this?"

Hamilton didn't reply. Locke raised his eyes. Hamilton stood inches from the cell bars.

"Are you gloating?" Locke asked.

Hamilton shook his head. "We don't gloat when the Masses start to realize the truth. And we don't call you Masses, by the way. We call you individuals."

"I still don't understand. How could being given everything a subject needs to survive lead to this?"

"It happens as easily as a Govicide Agent wanting to kill a guard because he is in the way of an abortion. You think the guard as expendable because you want what you want. He is a means to an end. You don't see him as an equal. You don't see him as human. You see him as just a cog in the OWG machine, replaceable at a moment's notice. You don't see him as being unique. Special. He's an obstacle. You don't care about his rights. You care about an abortion. Well, the OWG doesn't care about the Masses' individual rights. All it cares about is that everyone follows its mandates so it can continue to run everybody's lives. And the OWG is perfectly willing to provide everything for everyone in return. But, it forces all of you to work for the OWG to do it. The problem . . ."

Hamilton stopped in mid-sentence. Was he choking up? ". . . is that it's not working."

"What do you mean?" Locke put his face very close to the bars. "I haven't heard anything about that."

"Why would you? Over five billion people have died making sure everyone is provided with everything. Time and time again, civilizations have tried one version or another of the OWG. And none of them work. Doesn't matter what kind of technology, fear, coercion, none of it matters. Eventually, people pick death over continuing, no matter how much stuff they are getting."

Suicides and homicides were increasing, Locke knew. "Yeah . . ." It wasn't a word in support of Hamilton. It was more of an utterance of a suspicion.

"But, there's more. Because the OWG doesn't believe in human rights, it exists contrary to human nature. Thus, it can't be a life-giving entity. It can only be a death-giving one. The OWG kills people it can't feed or house, all in an effort to fulfill the desire to provide everything for everyone. The problem was that when there were three billion people in the OWG, it could only provide for two and a half because its ideas just don't work. When there were two and a half billions subjects, the OWG could only provide for two. Now there are two billion subjects and they want to get the number down to one and a half billion. How do you think that's happening, Locke? Where are those people vanishing to?"

“I . . . I don’t know . . .” Actually, Locke kind of suspected given the rest of the conversation. He turned his head away expecting a horrible answer.

“They’re dead. Killed by the OWG. Not all executed. But death by starvation and disease. It doesn’t take long when people expect their Goods and Services to appear on their doorstep and have forgotten how to provide for themselves. People can die pretty quickly without food and water.” Hamilton snapped his fingers. “Poof. Gone. That’s why the first Exalted Leader got rid of the first System, the one using security cameras. They didn’t get rid of those cameras because they were using electricity. They got rid of them because the cameras were recording everyone dying. They were recording Govicide Agents outright murdering people. People committing suicide. All of it was just too tough to cover up. So, they needed a new System where the evidence could be altered or deleted. Thus, the current System.”

All anxiety of getting caught by Govicide disappeared. He felt like he was standing below an air conditioning vent, his mind crisp and alert. Hamilton’s words were what he’d been waiting for since the first Symbol. He wasn’t about to go anywhere.

“But why can’t the OWG do it? Why can’t it provide for all two billion subjects when it was just providing for two billion subjects at some point in the recent past?” Locke heard a whine in his voice and cleared his throat.

Hamilton began limping around the cell again. “Good question. Because forcing people to do something is the most inefficient form of relationship. The person who wants to grow food for everyone will find a way. The person who is forced to grow food will comply, but at the minimal acceptable level. And no amount of coercing, technology, and enticement can change that. Everyone in the OWG is forced to do something . . . or else. Except Govicide, of course. But, Govicide doesn’t feed people, although I’m sure the Director would say otherwise. The only way to run a civilization is for the citizens to figure out how to serve one another through choice. Any other way and people die from perfectly avoidable circumstances.

Locke rested his forehead on the cool bars. “This is all a little hard to believe. I believe you but . . .”

“Let me guarantee you something, Locke. The governments that can be trusted the most are the ones that say, ‘We are here to give you nothing. We exist only to protect, not to give.’ Whereas, the government that comes into power saying, ‘We will give the Masses everything they need,’ will surely be the OWG that takes the most. You’d understand if you knew Earth’s history.”

Locke looked up the hall, realizing he would have to leave soon.

“Is it time?” Hamilton asked. “What exactly are you going to do about your situation?” He retreated to his cot, lowering himself into it with a grunt.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.” Locke shook his head, eyes at the floor. “Try to convince the female not to talk if she hasn’t talked already? Have Jade get the abortion and hope the System makes a mistake? I really don’t know.” Locke had begun to feel better because of his talk with Hamilton. But now, he felt a lump forming in his throat.

“Well, whatever happens, this has been interesting. Maybe something will work out.” Hamilton lay down on his cot.

“I have to go. And . . . thanks.”

“You take care, Govicide Agent Locke.”

Locke's shoes tapped on the floor. The distance between he and the murderer became greater with every step. He didn't want to turn around to glance at the cell. Too much temptation there. Too much to learn. Too much to know. He needed to get to Jade.

"You know better than anyone, Govicide Agent Locke! You can't evade the OWG," Hamilton yelled from his cell. "Unless you're me, of course!"

CHAPTER 38

“What did Hamilton yell at you, Govicide . . . I mean . . . Locke?” Ned asked when Locke handed him the keys.

“It’s nothing. Just a murderer upset that I got to him. That’s all.” The words fell out like subjects escaping a burning building, hurried and disorderly.

“Well, I am glad you did because--”

Locke marched away, leaving Ned standing there.

“See you later, Govicide . . . I mean . . . Locke.” Ned’s voice echoed down the corridor.

Once the double doors closed behind him, he screeched to a stop. All the information from Hamilton satisfied cravings he’d had for days. Yet all of it only put a band-aid on his bleeding problem.

He was eager to evade the System.

Why? Because he was an Offender now. Just another subject of the Masses who wanted to get around the OWG and the System.

Just like Hamilton. Just like the Messenger. Just like the Free Enterprisers who moved all the cash.

Jade and he disobeyed the OWG and now they were trying to evade the consequences, like any Offender. They weren’t special because Locke carried a Govicide badge anymore.

They were Offenders, going down the same path all Offenders before them had tried. And failed.

When had his desires become more important than the OWG mandates? A subject’s own wants were grounds for prison time, or even worse. In fact, he knew that was how Offenders got started in the first place, worrying about their own economic needs before everyone else’s. Now, he was no different.

What if Locke knew he and Jade were right, but the OWG was. . . wrong?

There, he said it.

He heard Hamilton’s voice. It wasn’t coming from the cell a hundred yards away. The voice clanged in Locke’s head.

People have no rights when the One World Government is never wrong.

Looking at the double doors behind him, he agonized over these thoughts. His palms were slick with sweat. His head hurt as he hung it, confused over his allegiances.

The OWG gave him and Jade everything for all their lives. A roof over their head. Food. Clothing. Entertainment. How could he turn on it so quickly?

Because the OWG was wrong, no matter how many Goods and Services he got. Five billion dead. Many more starving, if Hamilton could be believed.

But the OWG insisted one day everyone would have an automobile. And all the buildings would be populated. And the air would be clean.

But, nobody will be left, his conscience protested. There won’t be anyone to drive those automobiles and breathe the air.

If he were a good member of the Masses, he should turn himself in. Jade should do the same. And put themselves at the mercy of the OWG.

If he and Jade believed in the OWG, they should surrender without question.

Or, if Locke believed Hamilton, they should run.

Simple as that.

But, even Hamilton got caught. And if he got caught, anyone could. Even the Messenger and all the others would be snared. It just hadn't happened yet.

Both choices made him queasy. They wouldn't be presentable to Jade, either. She'd be angry when she heard Hamilton refused to help. Locke would have to tell her Hamilton didn't believe in abortions.

She'd laugh. Then cry.

If they ran, how would they travel? All transportation was tracked.

On foot? That was no way to escape. They'd be caught in no time. Hamilton was correct. There was no way to avoid the OWG for the rest of their lives. Thirty years? No way.

Locke raised his head to look at the doors leading to the Homicide Offices, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

Now, he understood what went through Jade's head when she tried to take her life. As illogical as her behavior seemed then, it seemed sensible now. Maybe suicide was the only way out. It was better than enduring imprisonment and torture. Maybe Jade's actions two hours ago made more sense than he knew.

But he couldn't see himself cutting his wrists or slashing Jade's.

What about jumping off a tall building? That could be the best way. Any of the roofs of Gambling City's casinos were high enough.

A short fall, then splat, and it would all be over. No more thoughts of the Symbol, Hamilton, cash, the System, the OWG. Everything would turn to black and their worries would disappear.

Yes. This was the only answer. If he and Jade couldn't show obedience to the OWG during life, maybe by committing suicide they could do that in death. Their Goods and Services could save someone currently starving like Hamilton mentioned.

A death-giving entity . . .

Hamilton's words echoed.

Locke ran down the hallway through another set of double doors and back to the empty Homicide office. He wound around one desk after another. The front door beckoned.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Govicide Agent Locke?"

He knew the voice.

Hiss.

He didn't allow Locke to answer. "How was your conversation with Hamilton?"

"Fine." Locke rotated, seeing Hiss in the shadows behind a cabinet. "What are you doing here?"

The veteran Agent stepped out. A streetlight outside a near window outlined his puffy face. "I will ask the questions. What did you two talk about?" By the parental tone of his voice, he already knew the answer.

Locke lied anyway, teeth chattering. "The case."

“The case? What did you find out?” Hiss took a few steps, closing the distance to fifteen feet. His face blank but turned to the side just a fraction, eyeing Locke.

“Not much. He’s tough.” His left foot tapped a nervous rhythm.

“You were in there . . . oh . . .” Hiss lifted his watch up into the light. “. . . twenty minutes. He had to have said something.”

When Hiss said it, the sudden recognition that he couldn’t save himself landed on Locke like an SST. “What did you do, Govicide Agent Hiss? Follow me?”

“Yes, I did,” Hiss sneered, “on mandates from the Director.”

Locke gripped the edge of the desk beside him. “The Director?” His eyes spied the front door, estimating how long it would take to get from here to there.

“Yes, the Director.”

“He allowed me to talk to Hamilton, so why are you here?”

“Tell me what you talked about and I will explain.”

“I told you already. He didn’t say much.” Locke’s fingernails made thin indentations in the wood desktop.

Hiss crept closer. One side of his mouth curled. “Govicide Agent Locke, twenty minutes and nothing? That is a little hard for me to believe.”

What did we talk about? What did we talk about? What did we talk about? . . . for twenty minutes. “Well, I tried to get him to talk about that vehicle in Snow City. He didn’t say anything. I tried to get him to talk about the break-in at the technical facility. He didn’t want to talk about that either. I was going to make a report for the Director, just like he told me to.”

“Really? You talked about our investigation?”

“Uh-huh.” Maybe running to the door wasn’t the answer. Maybe attacking Hiss was.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Hiss pulled a box out. In the dark office, Locke couldn’t be sure what it was. Maybe it was Hiss’ phone. Why was he pulling that out? Locke gripped the desk tighter. Was Hiss going to call the Director?

Locke heard a click then a familiar voice.

“. . . Because the OWG doesn’t believe in human rights, it exists contrary to human nature.”

A recording device.

Hamilton’s voice.

Another click and the voice ceased. Locke’s legs gave way and he fell into a chair beside the desk.

This was the end of the road.

“Now Govicide Agent Locke, that does not sound like talk about what we found. Does it?” Hiss smiled, his imperfect teeth like daggers.

Locke hung his head, staring at the floor. His knees shook like leaves in the fall.

Hiss didn’t wait for Locke to speak. “No, it does not. It sounds to me like you conspired with an Offender. I listened to the entire conversation.”

Locke’s calves tensed to run. He could be out the front door in three seconds. He could run out to his automobile and get away in less than thirty. He could get back to his living quarters in minutes.

But then what?

Running wouldn't solve this. Just like there was no running away from what Locke already knew. The two were linked. Locke couldn't run from the OWG, and he couldn't run from the truth.

He'd be followed. He'd be tracked. And Hiss might have already alerted other Agents who were on their way to capture Jade.

As Locke searched himself for the courage, he found his heart just wasn't in it. He was tired. He thought of Jade and her suicide attempt. She had wanted to give up. And now he wanted to do the same.

Hiss flipped on an overhead office light. Locke shielded his eyes.

"The Director had a tiny listening device put in Hamilton's cell during one of the torture sessions. Funny enough, I got the idea after what you told me about him murmuring in his cell. How is that for irony, Michael?"

Hiss had never referred to Locke by anything other than "Govicide Agent." Another sign this was the end.

"What? Nothing to say? OWG cat got your tongue? And what is this about Jade being pregnant? Sex without credits? That will get you every time." Hiss shook his head but continued to smile. "But you just could not turn down working for Govicide. You know, you should have declined the promotion. Turning down the Director would have cost you many credits, but at least you would not be in line for an execution like you are now."

Hiss pulled a stun gun from inside his jacket. Locke had seen a few in his life and knew they were accurate to thirty feet. The probes would fly and stab him, filling him full of electricity.

Why couldn't Hiss have brought a real gun? Locke could've made a move for the door. Hiss would shoot him, and that would be the end. Everything would turn to black.

He thought of Jade. If he died, what would she do? They'd torture her for a time then allow her to live out the rest of her existence in isolation. Somewhere cold. Somewhere dark. Somewhere . . . alone. Then, they would execute her as well.

No. If their fates were already decided, he wanted them to face their short future together, whether it was at the wrong end of a gun or guillotine.

He stayed in his seat, not wanting to provoke Hiss' trigger finger.

"I'm not going anywhere, Hiss." If Hiss was dispensing with titles, why shouldn't he? Locke sat straight in his chair, facing away from the door.

"That is more like it." Hiss moved closer. "You know why the Director put me with you? Because you are one of the Masses. Just another one of those who could not pass the Govicide Test. And the Director thought he better put you with the best of the best, in case he was right."

"Right about what?" Locke folded his arms.

"That a subject is either Govicide material or not. That is all you were. An experiment. And it is an experiment proving there is a bigger difference between Govicide and the Masses than we thought. If you think Govicide was tough before . . . Think of it. We publicize that the Director picked one of the Masses to be an Agent. He did it out of the kindness of his heart. Then that Agent sympathized with an Offender, an Offender who killed fourteen Agents. Govicide will be even harder on the Masses."

Locke felt ready to burst. Hiss was correct. This would be a boon for Govicide. Govicide would use Locke's story to justify being even tougher on the Masses. Less sex credits. Less work credits. An even tougher System program.

"Get up." Hiss motioned with the gun.

Hiss stayed six feet behind Locke as they retraced Locke's steps from minutes ago.

"Going to put you in a cell until I can get some other Agents to fly you to the District."

The beginning of the end would start in prison. Clothed in shackles and handcuffs, once the other Agents got here. In the end, he'd be locked down, attached to a guillotine, and his head would be taken off. In the District's main square.

The imaginary scenes danced in Locke's head. He hid his cringes from Hiss' penetrating eyes.

Then, something unexpected happened. The images of him and Jade being manhandled changed to pictures of other subjects being treated the same way. Anonymous faces thrown together by Locke's subconscious. Screaming, shouting, crying.

Locke realized subjects who didn't even know him and Jade would be the ultimate casualties of Locke's curiosity and missteps. His and Jade's end would be quick. The Masses would have to endure his mistakes forever.

And if he gave up and slinked to a quiet, obedient death, he'd lead the rest of the Masses right into the OWG's hands.

His acceptance of his fate began to change . . .

There was a time long ago when he thought he'd be relieved when this case was over. Jade would get her abortion. Hamilton would be hung, or shot, or beheaded. Locke would be lauded for his crime-solving abilities. The Offenders would be stopped and everybody would go on their way.

Now he realized what a waste the world had become. Though he didn't understand all that Hamilton said, he believed Hamilton enough to know there was a different time in human existence. It wasn't perfect, but it must have been good enough that subjects like Hamilton were fighting to go back in that direction.

Locke wanted to go back in that direction as well.

He didn't want anything to be over.

CHAPTER 39

“You know, Hiss, the World isn’t supposed to be this way.” Locke muttered. They approached the last set of doors.

“I heard Hamilton’s lies. And that is what they are. Lies. There was nothing before the OWG. Nothing but anarchy. Everyone starving and at each other’s throats.”

They reached the doors. Pushing them open, Locke remained alert for an opportunity, some way to disarm Hiss. Nothing presented itself. Hiss had done this before. He didn’t allow Locke to slam the doors on the hand holding the stun gun.

“You have to think about it from my point of view. Look how good I have it. Look at how much control I have. The power I have. One of a few subjects in the World who get to fly. I have an automobile. I live better than just about anyone else except for the Director and the Exalted One. Are you telling me I would live better in some other type of civilization?”

“See, you’re not even a true believer in the OWG, Hiss.”

“I am a total believer in the OWG. The System. And Govicide. And what I know is that in any other type of OWG, I would not have the power I have. That is why I believe it is imperative the OWG provide Goods and Services for everyone.”

“And you didn’t find anything Hamilton said about humans true at all? Don’t you see what’s going on around you? Look at people.” The un-mandated word came out as if he was Hamilton. “Haven’t you seen people on the buses? Heads down, staring at the floor. Not talking to each other like they’re in some kind of trance?” Locke almost spun around but stopped, thinking Hiss might stun him.

“I only give attention to the Masses when I have to. Like when they rip off the OWG.”

“I don’t understand, Hiss. Do you hate the Masses? Is that it?”

“No. Of course not. I pity them. That is why I want to make sure they get everything they need. And at the same time I make sure they do not use their limited intelligence to go behind the OWG’s back.”

“What’s the point, Hiss? What really is the point for providing everything for everyone? Can you tell me? You call it pity. I call it hate. Why would you provide anything to anyone you hate?”

“Michael, someone has to love the OWG, correct?” Hiss answered, poking Locke in the back.

Locke opened his mouth to respond, but he reached the last double doors. He pushed them open.

Ned stood at his post just as before. “Govicide . . . I mean . . . Locke . . . I mean . . .”

Locke realized the moment Ned noticed the stun gun, bowing while keeping his eyes on it.

Hiss whispered like a snake. Locke wrinkled his nose at the Agent’s breath. “Keep things nice. No more of this talk.” Hiss raised his chin and shouted at Ned. “Security Guard, this subject is to never be called Govicide Agent again. He is an Offender sympathizer. The conversation with Hamilton earlier was un-mandated. I want to lock

him in one of your cells until I can alert the District and the other Agents in the area about what has happened.”

Ned stepped out in front of his podium, tripping on the edge of the stand.

“You better do as he says, Ned,” Locke added.

The keys jingled. Hands shaking, Ned opened the doors. Locke heard them slam shut behind him a few seconds later. The sound was an exclamation point at the end of an ugly sentence. A few more moments and his fate would be sealed. Still, he had no intention on giving up.

Locke tried to find a way to stall, but he didn’t see an alternative. He remembered an empty cell, two away from Hamilton’s. If Locke managed to get Hamilton involved with this somehow, he might be able to distract Hiss for a second.

Fifty paces separated him from the cell. Locke shifted to the left side of the hallway so he had an angle to see Hamilton’s cell. If he saw movement, he’d get the killer’s attention.

The other choice was to attack Hiss outright. With the Agent six feet behind him, the odds of getting to Hiss before the Agent stunned him were small. But, even if he did, Ned would come running in seconds.

Who would Ned side with? Hiss or Locke?

With their comradeship over the years, Locke hoped Ned would side with him. But, that was folly. Ned had to side with Hiss. A subject had no choice in such matters.

Locke took ten steps while he thought. Ten steps closer to the end of his life.

Something would have to compel Hiss not to take him to the cell.

Another ten steps. Halfway there.

If he could attract Hamilton’s attention, maybe the murderer would get the idea. He’d need to know Locke needed help.

Another ten steps. Locke’s cell was too close.

Then, Hiss offered his own solution. “Let us visit Hamilton’s cell. I want to rub it in a bit. He killed my partner. Now I will get to execute his.”

It made perfect sense. A spineless, shallow male like Hiss didn’t have the courage to confront Hamilton until he knew he could hurt Hamilton back. That was what Hiss’ avoidance of Hamilton had been all about. Hiss said all this time he didn’t want to be in Hamilton’s presence out of respect for his former partner.

But it wasn’t true.

He only wanted to do it if Hiss could prove he was better than Hamilton, that he had gotten the best of Hamilton. All this time, he only wanted to see Hamilton if he could exact revenge on the murderer.

This was Locke’s chance.

When Locke and Hiss arrived outside Hamilton’s cell, Hamilton lay in the same position he’d been in before, on his cot facing the wall.

“Hamilton, get up! Got something I want to show you,” Hiss yelled loud enough to hurt Locke’s ears.

Hamilton jerked in his cot and turned his head.

“Whoa . . . check out your face, Hamilton. Seems my fellow Agents did some plastic surgery.” Hiss laughed.

Locke caught Hamilton’s eye. Hamilton looked at Hiss.

“Good one, Govicide Agent Hiss.” Hamilton rose from his cot as slowly as before. “What’s going on here?”

“This is what is going on.” Hiss reached into his pocket and pulled out the recorder. He pressed the “rewind” and then the “play” button.

“ . . . Because the OWG doesn’t believe in human rights, it exists contrary to human nature.”

Hiss pressed the “Stop” button.

“Hey, that sounds like me,” Hamilton said, laughing then coughing. Blood appeared at the creases of his mouth.

“It is you, Hamilton,” Hiss answered.

Hamilton glanced at Locke. Locke wondered if the murderer thought he was being played. He hoped Hamilton was a better judge of a situation than that.

This is the real thing, Hamilton. Locke wished Hamilton heard his thought.

“You got us on tape? I guess that’s bad news for me and Govicide Agent--”

Hiss interrupted, “He is not to be addressed as a Govicide Agent again!”

“Okay,” Hamilton held his hand up in surrender. “I guess that’s bad news for me and Locke. Well, I’m in here. So, what are you going to do with him?”

“I am going to put him in a cell two doors down. And in a few hours other Agents will come and take him away. They will haul him to the District where I am sure the Director will have some very direct words. After that . . . well . . .” Hiss pointed to Hamilton’s face, “. . . you know what will happen.”

“Is this some type of setup? Is that what this is?” Hamilton asked Locke.

Locke’s eyes became large white circles. Here Hiss told the complete truth and Hamilton’s “setup” sirens were going off.

Hamilton continued talking, his voice getting louder and angrier by the second. “So, it wasn’t enough, Locke, that you caught me. It wasn’t enough they’ve ruined my face for life. Not that I have long to live anyway. But, you went and set me up?”

“No. Hamilton, wait . . .” Locke protested, his emotions walking a narrow ledge.

“You gave me that sob story about your girlcomrade being pregnant. About how you wanted to know all about what it’s like to be an Offender. What it was like before the OWG. The famous person with your last name. And now you’re pulling this? What do you think? That I’m going to tell you even more while you’re sitting a few cells from me? If I get out of here, you are next on my list.”

Hamilton took one quick, crippled step to his cell bars and slapped them. Locke drew back, opening his mouth to answer.

But Hiss spoke first. “A setup? A setup? We already have enough to execute you. We do not need to set you up!”

Locke stole a glimpse of Hiss, face red as blood. Veins stuck out in his neck like the roots of a tree.

Hamilton wiped his mouth on his black jumpsuit sleeve before answering. “Govicide Agent Hiss, you’re right. You got more than enough on me. That’s true. But there is no way you can convince me somehow you outsmarted Locke here. He’s too smart for you. I’ve talked to him a few times. And I know Locke has a brain in there. The only explanation is you two are in on this together somehow. You put this plan together just to humiliate me. And the stun gun is a nice touch.”

While Hamilton spoke, he limped toward the far side of the cell where Hiss was forced to turn his head to see him. Was this on purpose? Hiss had a hard time keeping his eyes on Hamilton and Locke at the same time.

Did Hamilton have a plan?

But Hamilton couldn't do anything. He was behind the bars. Locke's mind struggled to put this puzzling scene together. Did Hamilton believe his own words? Locke watched Hamilton for any telltale signs.

"Locke is too smart for me? Ha!" Hiss let out a barrel laugh. "I caught you and him in the act, Hamilton. I am smarter than both of you!"

Continuing his watch, Locke's detective skills kicked into motion. *Put it together, Michael. Put it together.*

Hiss ranted on, "I passed the Govicide test. Not Locke. Did you ever take the Govicide test, Hamilton? Of course not. But you would not have passed it either. I am the one who figured out the relationship between your murders and the moving of the cash from those warehouses. Nobody else. Me! Who is the oldest Agent in Govicide? Me. Because I am smart."

"That's not what I've heard," Hamilton answered like he truly didn't know more than he was letting on.

"What do you know? I am out here. You are in there. Who is smarter than who, Hamilton?" Hiss raged.

Locke had never seen him so hysterical. Hamilton had tapped into something regarding Hiss and his intelligence.

Remaining his calm self, Hamilton spoke, "Where a subject resides is never an indication of what his intelligence is. But, if you are really asking me how I'm sure you're stupid, I'll tell you. You're ex-partner told me. The dead one."

Locke's jaw dropped. So did every organ in his body. Like a fever breaking, refreshing beads of sweat surfaced on his arms and neck. Yes, this was a ruse. He and Hamilton were on the same page.

Out of the corner of his eye, Locke saw Hiss moving toward Hamilton. Hamilton stood eight feet in front of Locke, behind the bars. Hiss stood off to Locke's left, just behind him. To the right ran the long hallway leading to the guard's stand. On the other side of Hiss was a solid wall.

Hiss crept between Locke and the wall to the left. He still pointed the stun gun at Locke, but his attention focused on Hamilton. As Hiss moved, he got closer and closer to Locke. And Locke was four feet from the wall. Hiss would pass through this tight space if he kept moving straight toward Hamilton.

"What did you say?" Hiss growled.

"Your ex-partner. You know, the one I killed. I can't even remember his name now. There's been so many victims." Hamilton sounded like was reading the OWG Daily. Steady with no emotion.

"His name was William Cardon." Hiss banged his fist against the wall.

"Oh yeah, right. Billy Cardon. Dead Govicide Agent." Hamilton cackled, his good eyebrow vibrating up and down. "How could I forget? Well, while I was killing him and he was begging for his life, he yelled I should kill you instead because you were definitely the stupid one."

"Shut up." The growling intensified.

“Shut up? Why? You want to hear your partner’s dying words, don’t you?”

Locke reminded himself this was a show and the finale was approaching. His scene was coming soon.

“Shut up! You hear me?” Hiss took a step forward. One more step. Just one more. “Govicide Agent Cardon was a close comrade and the best partner. He did not think that about me. Never. He never said anything like that!”

A half step more.

“I’m telling you, Hiss,” Hamilton twisted the verbal knife by not using the “Govicide Agent” title. “His dying words were that I should kill you instead. In his words, ‘a stupid idiot’.”

It was like a magnet. The two opposite sides attracting one another. On one hand there was Hamilton. No emotion. Controlled. Simple. Deliberating.

On the other was Hiss. Full of emotion. Uncontrolled. Complex. Stumbling.

“You are a liar.” Hiss took the last step.

The stun gun still pointed at Locke, but it was too close.

Locke knocked it away with his left hand. The gun went flying, while Hiss’ right arm bent behind him at an awkward angle.

Locke threw all of his weight against Hiss. He felt the air rush out of Hiss’ body as he compressed the fat Agent against the wall. But Hiss fought like a mythical Govicide Agent in one of those OWG paintings.

Being shorter, Hiss had leverage against him, and in a few seconds Locke felt himself sliding backwards. If Locke wasn’t careful, he knew he might get into the same situation as in Francoville where Hiss pinned him against the fence.

Locke dug his heels into the floor to combat his backward movement. He heard Ned yelling far behind him. Something about how he would be there in a minute once he got his spare keys.

“Move him over here. I can help you.” Now Hamilton urged Locke on.

“You are dead, Locke. You are dead,” Hiss grunted, trying to get Locke pushed back on his heels.

They struggled. Neither landed a punch because they’d have to let go of the other. As their feet fought for the advantage, the stun gun got kicked one way, then the other.

Out of the corner of Locke’s eye, Hamilton cheered him on. “Locke, get lower. Lower. Bend your knees,” Hamilton urged.

Hiss grunted and shrieked, the two spinning round and round like a carousel. Locke spied the stun gun in the corner opposite Hamilton’s cell. Hamilton couldn’t reach it. Locke realized he’d better wrap this up soon, or Ned would get that gun.

An idea flashed into Locke’s head. He remembered something from an OWG film he saw. A scene where a Govicide Agent fought a Free Enterpriser. In a fight very similar to this, the Agent used the Enterpriser’s weight against himself.

Locke let his legs collapsed and he fell to the ground. In the process, Hiss’ own force pushed him over Locke. He flipped over Locke onto his back.

Hiss released a deafening yell as the floor shook. It sounded like the old Agent broke something. He grabbed his back.

Locke saw Ned unlock the first barred door. He’d be there in less than twenty seconds but he didn’t carry a weapon. If Locke reached the stun gun first, he might win this battle.

For the moment, though, Hiss needed stopped. The Agent pulled out his phone and began to dial.

Grab the gun or stop Hiss from dialing?

The gun—it could stop both Ned and Hiss.

With little time to act, Locke crawled to the stun gun in the far corner. He grabbed it and aimed.

Headed toward Locke at a full sprint, Ned slowed when he saw the weapon pointed at him. At fifteen feet, he put up his hands.

“I know we’ve been comrades, Ned. But I’ll use this. I won’t hesitate.” Locke promised.

But what was Hiss doing? Locke was surprised he didn’t already hear Hiss alerting Govicide.

When his attention returned to Hiss, he realized why he didn’t hear anything. Hiss landed on his back within arm’s reach of Hamilton. While Locke scrambled to get the stun gun, Hamilton had stretched one arm out and grabbed Hiss’ collar. Knocking the phone out of Hiss’ hand, the killer hooked one arm around Hiss’ neck and squeezed.

Hiss’ tongue hung from his mouth like a tie. His arms grabbed at Hamilton, but it was no use. Hamilton was an expert killer, and being behind those bars allowed him to choke Hiss more easily.

As the life seeped from Hiss, Hamilton pulled tighter. After what felt like an eternity, Hamilton removed his arm from around Hiss’ neck and the dead Agent’s head fell to one side. His body slid down the bars to the cement floor.

Not a sound came from the cell bloc, as if every prisoner held his breath. They pressed themselves against their cell bars, trying to see what just happened.

Hamilton stood, wincing one more time, and rubbed his knee. He leered at Ned and at Locke. “What? You never saw a dead guy before?” Hamilton sat on his cot, landing heavily. “Well, are you going to put the Guard in a cell or not?”

Locke smiled at Hamilton for a second, wondering if this man was as cool and cold as he appeared. “Yeah.”

A minute later, Ned sat in the cell meant for Locke.

“Ned, I still think you’re a good subject . . . I mean . . . person. But what’s going on here is bigger than you’d ever know. Sorry. Yell loud enough in about eight hours and day shift will let you out,” Locke suggested.

“Thanks for not shooting me, Locke.” Ned responded, shrugging. Hands shaking.

“Keep your eyes open. See the Symbols.” Locke told him before hustling back to Hamilton’s cell. The serial killer still sat on his cot.

“For a second there, I wasn’t sure where you were going with all that. How did you know it would work?” Locke asked.

“We Free Enterprisers do our own psychological work as well. You don’t think I killed all those Agents by just showing up, did you? I knew what made all my victims tick. Part of the work.”

This man on the other side of these bars wasn’t only a killer, but a student. A teacher. A scholar.

“So, how’d you realize you weren’t being set up?”

Hamilton laughed and stretched his arms. “Well first, not even one of those OWG actors could perform like you did when we talked before. But, I’m wondering how you

didn't know they put the listening device in my cell. I wonder where they put it . . .” Hamilton mused, surveying his cell.

“Hamilton, I think they set me up from the beginning. If this hadn't happened I think they would've done something else. All in an effort to show the Masses that even their best and brightest, me--a guy who got promoted out of the Director's kindness—couldn't be as smart and loyal to the OWG as Govicide Agents who passed the tests. When this gets out, they're going to use my disloyalty to clamp even harder on the Masses.”

Hamilton closed his eyes and grimaced. “We have to fight them, Locke.”

“I know. But what can I do?” Locke grabbed the bars.

Hamilton raised his head and then rubbed his good eye. “Here's what you're going to do. They won't know about all of this for what? Seven, eight hours? Take Hiss' keys. His phone. The stun gun. His car. Grab Jade and anything you can. Water, food, whatever you might need. Write this address down.”

Locke bent over and took pen and small notebook out of Hiss' jacket. “Remember, that thing could still be recording.”

“Right. I'll write it down for you.” Hamilton hobbled to the bars.

Locke handed him a pen and scrap of paper from Hiss' jacket. A few seconds later, Locke read the address. 1000 Smith Street, Ocean City.

“What is it?”

“It's an oasis. Stay there until somebody shows up.” Hamilton pointed at the address.

“A what?”

“It's a place Free Enterprisers like me go when the OWG gets too much for us. It's a place where we get replenished. You'll see what I mean when you get there.”

“Then what?” Locke pushed the piece of paper into his pants pocket.

“Eventually someone will stop by. You might be there a day. A week. Maybe longer. But eventually somebody will come. They'll help you. And don't drive the car right to the address. Park a good distance away and walk.”

Locke's foot rubbed against Hiss' body. “You didn't have to kill him. I think he hurt his back. He wasn't a threat anymore. I could've put him in the cell with the Guard.”

“I didn't do that for you. I did it for me.” The tip of Hamilton's thumb bounced off his chest.

“What do you mean?”

“Govicide Agent Alex Hiss should have been my first kill. Our analysis showed he might be the Agent the Director put on the case to figure out where the cash went. Two years ago, I showed up where Hiss was supposed to be. Somehow I got mixed up and followed his partner instead. One thing led to another and I had to kill Cardon anyway. Luckily, everything still worked out, I guess. But my reputation was tainted when everyone found out I killed the wrong guy. They--”

Locke interrupted, “Who's they?”

“Whoever meets you at the oasis will tell you. I can't tell you in case you and Jade get caught.”

“Okay,” he frowned. “I guess that's good enough for now.”

“But, as I was saying, they almost didn't let me go on mission number two. So, Hiss should've died two years ago. These last two years were a gift from me to him.”

“I guess even experts like you mess up once in a while,” Locke smiled.

“And smart subjects like you get caught by guys like Hiss once in a while.” Hamilton playfully punched Locke on his shoulder.

“Can I let you out?” Locke wanted Hamilton to come along. What a great journey it would be. All the stories Hamilton could tell. Everything Locke could learn.

Hamilton shook his head. “Nope. Can’t do it. Enough Agents are going to be trying to

track you as it is. I leave here, and you can double that number. And I’ve told you, Locke. I have to take my medicine. That’s the way it works. In our world, I would be expected to pay a penalty. So I have to pay the penalty here, too. Just because they are two different worlds doesn’t mean anything. I’ll be fine.”

Locke gazed down the hall, which seemed longer than before. He knew he’d soon walk it without the person who opened his mind to new possibilities. Hamilton had become a comrade. No, more than that. He was that un-mandated word:

Friend.

They’d been enemies two weeks ago, but truth had a way of changing people.

“I guess that’s it.” Locke stuck his hand between the bars. Hamilton grabbed it and shook it firmly. No sign that the torture had diminished his strength at all. And his hands were rough as if he’d been using tools.

“I envy you, Locke. You are about to embark on a trip, literally and figuratively, that I’m not sure anyone has experienced. From believing in the OWG to believing in something else. It’s going to take time. I’ve given you a taste of what is out there. Remember when I told you about the Pyramids at our first meeting?”

“Yeah, I do. Been thinking about them ever since.” How long ago had that been now? It felt like years. Like he’d been a child when Hamilton said it.

“That word made you think, did it? Good.”

“And when I saw some bills of cash with a Pyramid on them, I wondered if it was all related.”

“Hmmm . . . kind of a coincidence.” Hamilton tapped his lips. “The Pyramids make a good analogy for us, to what we believe. They were built over two thousand years ago. Actually, the people who built them lived in a very small version of the OWG. Anyway, the Pyramids symbolize to us how an idea can exist, then get covered up over time. Nobody remembers how the Pyramids were built. The physical plans have been lost. But somewhere . . . in here . . .” Hamilton pointed to his head. “. . . those plans still exist. We just have to find them. The building plans for the Pyramids are no different than what we believe about how this Earth should be. Those ideas for humankind, “plans” if you will, have been covered up by the OWG through various means. But that doesn’t mean the ideas are dead. You’re finding them, even though you’ve been in the OWG your entire life. And what you’re finding out is that those plans have always been alive up there.” Hamilton pointed to Locke’s head. “The OWG hasn’t killed those ideas in you. We are all born—even citizens of the OWG--knowing what freedom is. Even if at this moment freedom doesn’t run the World, the plans for it are still in our brilliant minds just waiting to be unleashed. Those plans in your head, in my head, can build a new Pyramid, a new civilization. And if you have begun to discover the plans within yourself, there is at least a chance that all the other people within the OWG can do the same.”

“What’s freedom? I’ve never heard that word.” Tears formed moats around his eyes.

“Freedom is the opposite of the OWG. A place where every person chooses his own path. No threats of torture. A place where Goods and Services are plentiful but no one is a slave to another to make it happen. Everyone deals with each other by choice, not by force. Every person gets to keep what he produces. No one owes anything to anyone, especially the government. Oh . . .” Hamilton smirked, “. . . and no sex credits.”

“Really?” The tears flowed. “That could happen on this . . . Earth?”

“It could . . .”

It was a shame this man would die, Locke thought as the tears glazed his eyes. This man would endure torture, probing, and drugging until the OWG squeezed all it could out of him, and then it would kill him. Maybe in secret. Probably in public.

“Michael, I’ll be fine. You should go.”

“Yeah. I better,” Locke said. “Thanks.”

The men shook hands again. Locke stuffed the stun gun in a pocket then snatched Hiss’ automobile keys and phone. Irony filled Locke as he felt Hiss’ still-warm body. In death it would soon be very much like his personality in life: Stiff and cold.

In a blur, he was sitting in Hiss’ automobile, after finding it on a side street. Locke turned the key and pulled out, not looking back.

He was done with the System.

Done with the OWG.

And done with Govicide.

THE END

Michael Locke will be back in GOVICIDE: Survive